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CONFLICTS AMONG LESBIAN REPRESENTATIONS IN

HUNGARY

Csilla Kalocsai

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of
the Open University for the degree of Master of Philosophy

October 1999

Central European University

Budapest, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

In this study I examine dominant representations of lesbians and lesbian self-representations on identity and community in Hungary. I situate my study within the current political-economic transition, which provides the temporal scope of this project. I argue that the breakdown of state-socialism in Hungary offered opportunity for the establishment of civil society and the introduction of gay and feminist civil organizations. I consider gay and feminist organizations as subaltern counterpublics that provide space for lesbians to enter and account for the emergence and circulation of lesbian representations.

I explore how the Hungarian popular media depicts lesbians. I focus on the representational practices of the media texts, and I argue that Hungarian media constructs lesbianism in an ambivalent way. The journalistic representations give occasional visibility to lesbians, however, they restrict lesbian's voices, produce and reproduce stereotypical images about lesbians. The framing of the texts explicitly or implicitly mobilize dominant discourses on lesbianism, they thus reinscribe lesbianism into mainstream discourses.

Lesbian self-representations overlap and at times conflict with dominant representations of lesbians. In my empirical study, I investigate how lesbians represent and construct their identities in coming-out narratives. I show that the women interviewed present their identity as original, continuous, and totalizing. The adherence to essentialism makes coming out possible in a context which denies to recognize lesbian difference. Lesbian self-representations reproduce dominant representations of lesbians by laying claim to essentialist conceptions of identity, but they also contest mainstream representations by pointing out the social conditions of the construction of lesbian identity.

I also show how lesbians represent and construct their communities in their narratives. I argue that lesbians search for communities that are predicated on their shared sexual and gender identity and on their common experience of heterosexist and patriarchal oppression. However, I also point out that lesbian communities are multiple and fragmented social arenas which are constituted by differences and conflicts among lesbians. The inquiry of lesbian communities interrogates dominant representations by articulating lesbian political participation and questions lesbian self-representations of identity by reflecting on the differences among lesbian identities.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study would not have been completed without the help of a number of people. I would like to thank my two supervisors, Professor Henrietta Moore and Professor Darja Zavirsek for their critical comments and constructive suggestions at different stages of the project. I want to thank Darja for her personal and political guide, her emotional support and encouragement that sustained me through the processes of research and writing. I am also grateful to Professor Art Redding and Professor Jasmina Lukic and to the participants of the MPhil seminar who helped me clarify my thinking. My thanks go to Miklós Vörös for his attentive reading and editing of this work and to my sister, Kinga Kalocsai, who helped me transcribe my interviews.

My deepest appreciation goes to the lesbian women whose contributions ranged from sharing their stories through assembling media materials to friendship and love. They made my research an invaluable personal and intellectual experience.

My gratitude and love go to my friends in the Program on Gender and Culture at CEU, in particular to Iva Popovicova, Rebecca J. Nash, Katrin Kremmler, and Katrin Kimiiva.

INTRODUCTION

On the one hand, *representation* serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women.

- Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

Teresa de Lauretis in her discussion of the technology of gender¹ illuminates the complex and complicated relationship between the social representation of gender and the subjective representation or self-representation of gender (de Lauretis 1989). She argues that the constructions of gender are the product and the process of both social and subjective representations. Social representations are produced and reproduced in and through the various technologies of gender (e.g.: state, family, or school) which are effects of oppressive power regimes. However, different representations, subjective representations of gender can emerge on the margins of power regimes. Social representations and self-representations are thus implicated in the same power regimes and they are entangled, social representations promote and implant certain subjective construction of gender, while self-representations challenge and contest the social construction of gender. Social representations are taken up and adopted subjectively by individuals as their own representations, though incompletely, which leaves possibility for agency and self-determination in subjective representations that negotiate and resist social representations.

¹ De Lauretis' notion of technology of gender is a critical reworking of Foucault's notion of technology of sex (de Lauretis 1989, Foucault 1978).

Social representations and self-representations constitute points of departure and sites of inquiry of this study. I take up de Lauretis's notion of representations of gender, and discuss dominant representations of lesbians and lesbian self-representations in post-socialist Hungary. First, I focus on popular mass media as a technology that produces and reproduces dominant representations of lesbians. Next, I investigate two kinds of lesbian self-representations, the narrative encapsulation of lesbian identity and the narrative representation of lesbian communities. I examine both lesbian narratives as technologies that exist on the margin of hegemonic discourse and transform dominant representations of lesbians. However, I argue that dominant representations of lesbians and lesbian self-representations are both interconnected and conflicting. Dominant representations that offer rare visibility for lesbians construct distorted portrayals of lesbianism, and lesbian self-representations that seek cultural and political visibility both interrogate and reproduce dominant (mis)representations of lesbians.

The dominant cultural representations reduce lesbianism into sexuality and sexuality into personal-private matter, hence they do not recognize the complexity of lesbian difference. Like Elspeth Probyn I claim that the lesbian subject is "necessarily a doubled subject: female and lesbian" (1995: 79). Hence, lesbian difference is constituted in the intersection of gender and sexuality – in terms of de Lauretis it is a "gendered sexuality," and both gender and sexuality are implicated in and constructed through the authoritative norms of patriarchy that privileges the male subject and of heterosexism that privileges heterosexuality (1993: 144). The

study of lesbian self-representations attempts to reveal how lesbian women construct their identities and communities within the nexus of gender and sexuality.²

Before exploring how the dominant media represents lesbians and how lesbians represent their identities and communities in narratives, I situate my study within historical and theoretical frameworks. I will begin by considering that the breakdown of state-socialism in Hungary in 1989-1990 provided an opportunity for the establishment of civil society and the development of gay civil organizations which account for the emergence and circulation of lesbian representations. Then, I will consider lesbian and gay studies within anthropology and the feminist critique of anthropological epistemology and methodology, both of which offer theoretical grounds for my research. Last, I will discuss my fieldwork and research data which provide the basis of this analysis.

Civil Society and Gay and Feminist Civil Organizations in Hungary

Dominant representations of lesbians and lesbian self-representations could not have come about without the current political-economic transition of Hungary. Within state-socialism civil society did not exist. Political and civil citizenship, the grounds of civil society, were taken away from every member of society.³ As Peggy Watson argues state-socialism entailed universalism, a complete lack of recognition of any difference, be it class, ethnic, religious, gender, or sexual difference (Watson

² Other differences, differences among lesbian women are discussed in Chapter Three. De Lauretis rightly remarks: "What cannot be elided in a politically responsible theory of sexuality, of gender, or of culture is the critical value of that "also," which is neither simply additive nor exclusive but signals the nexus, the mode of operation of interlocking systems of gender, sexual, racial, class, and other, more local categories of social stratification" (1993: 148).

1997). However, the democratization of society and the restructuring of the economy have mobilized those differences which were hitherto rendered irrelevant and invisible and upon which civil society was predicated. The emerging civil society offers space for voluntary associations, networks, and organizations to recast their interests, needs, objectives, and strategies in order to reduce the extent of their subordination in the public sphere (c.f.: Fraser 1997). Watson remarks:

It is only when this space becomes reconfigured as civil society that the absence of political voice and powerlessness can become meaningful aspects of the subordination of women (as what is there to be voiced also changes). That is because within liberal civil society, citizens are excluded *relative to each other* in a way that was impossible under Communism. It is democratization itself that brings a new, essentially divisive, political force to gender relations (Watson 1997: 26-27).

As Watson rightly reveals, the establishment of civil society formally promises opportunity for women to recognize their subordination and take up political subject positions, but women's and feminist civil organizations are sporadic and feminist movements have not appeared in Hungary. In her critique of Habermas' concept of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser argues that liberal civil society is predicated on and constituted by a number of exclusions and marginalizations, which conveys that the public arena is accessible to some, but not to others (Fraser 1997). She claims that the liberal public sphere functions in a way that works to the advantage of dominant

³ Dissident movements clearly existed under state-socialism which paved the grounds for the

groups, while it precludes and prevents non-dominant groups from participation, and thus works to their disadvantage. Nancy Fraser and Susan Gal explains this inequality by pointing out that civil society depends on the cultural construction of the boundaries between "public" and "private" spheres. In her discussion of civil society in Hungary, Gal argues that the newly founded liberal civil society relegates men to the public, political spheres and women to the private, depoliticized spheres (Gal 1996). However, she also reveals that the naturalization and personalization of women as a social category are embedded in state-socialism:

In many countries in the region, an official discourse stressing the homogeneity and equality of all workers, regardless of gender, coexisted uneasily with another discourse that, though unofficial, was nevertheless supported by the state. The unofficial but sanctioned discourse stressed naturalized sexual difference and blamed "selfish," "overly competitive" women for the ills of men and children, and for the failings of the socialist economy. Ironically, gender difference was also part of an oppositional argument against communism that looked back nostalgically to the bourgeois nuclear family as the ideal of "natural" gender relations. This oppositional analysis decried social homogeneity, charging that communism was illegitimate in part because it violated laws of nature that were more fundamental than those of society (Gal 1996: 79).

In other words, Gal shows the continuities between dominant gender regimes in state-socialism and in post-socialism, between assumptions about "sex, "nature," and the "public/private" distinction which had enabled and legitimated state-socialism [and] could have new political effects in a changed political economy" in Hungary (Gal 1996: 80).

Both Watson and Gal focus on gender, since they examine why feminist movements have not emerged in Central-Eastern Europe – an expectation and disappointment of many Western feminists. By understanding civil society in gendered terms, they can explore the exclusions and marginalization of women from the public sphere in its historical specificity. However, following de Lauretis, I concentrate not only on gender but also on sexuality, and I argue that not only women, but also gays and lesbians are precluded from civil society in terms of their despised sexuality. In my analysis of dominant media representations of lesbians in Hungary, I show how lesbianism is constructed as and reduced to sexuality, and how sexuality is constructed as and restricted to a personal and private matter.⁴ A rhetoric of privacy about sexuality is thus produced and reproduced which excludes lesbians from the public arena and relegates them to a private and depoliticized sphere.⁵

Investigations of dominant gender and sexual regimes reveal that civil society is not a neutral space but structured along asymmetries of power, however, these studies do not account for the sporadic emergence of feminist and gay civil organizations in Hungary. In accordance with Fraser, I claim that civil society is not

⁴ See Chapter One.

⁵ A geneological study about sexuality is needed, similar to Gal's study about gender, in order to reveal the continuities and discontinuities of the dominant sexual regimes between state-socialism and post-socialism.

"single" and "overarching," but also open to subordinated groups, for instance to women and gays, though in a more limited way (Fraser 1997). She calls these organizations *subaltern counterpublics* and defines them as follows:

The point is that, in stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies (Fraser 1997: 82).

Subaltern counterpublics challenge the boundaries of the public and private distinction, expand and contest public discursive arenas in society. The introduction of civil society in Hungary has given rise to such subaltern counterpublics, the first gay and feminist cultural, social, and political institutions and initiatives, though limited in number and constrained in visibility. During the last decade ten gay civil organizations have been established, and three of them have been legally registered. These civil networks have been organizing parades on Gay Pride Day in Budapest for three years which attract hundreds of lesbians and gays to march on the streets and attend to various cultural programs. There are also some gay bars and restaurants open for lesbians on certain nights in Budapest.

The first Hungarian gay organization *Homeros-Lambda* was registered in 1988 when the first Law on Associations was passed by the Parliament.⁶ Its psychiatrist president still insists that homosexuality should be tolerated as an incurable disease, thus he maintains a naturalized, psychological conception of homosexuality. Only one lesbian woman joined the organization, but did not agree with the psychological interpretation of gayness and left the group. The second organization *Lambda-Budapest* was founded in 1991. Its main concern has been to publish a gay magazine *Mások* (Others) in order to provide visibility for gay lifestyles, to empower the oppressed gay communities, and to spread information to the gay public. As a half-porn gay magazine it indirectly excludes lesbian women from the membership and the readership. The third officially registered organization *Háttér* (*Background*) *Support Group for Gays and Lesbians* was established to launch a telephone helpline in 1995. It is the first civil organization which invites and welcomes lesbians as part of its membership. This support group concentrates on mental health issues and crisis intervention, provides information and builds gay and lesbian communities. Although a third of the membership are lesbian women, the organization is represented by gay men in public.⁷ Informal gay associations, like *Gay Circle of University Students*, *Sidra* for Jewish gay people,⁸ or *Club for Each Other* for young gays also consist of gay and lesbian members. Besides gay organizations, feminist groups, such as the *Feminist Network* that publishes a feminist journal entitled *Nőszemély* (Female Person) and *NaNE* (Women Fighting Against Violence Against Women), incorporate some lesbian members too. The

⁶ Judit Takács provides an overview of Hungarian gay civil organizations, although she exclusively concentrates on gay men (1997: 93-107).

⁷ See Chapter One.

double subordination of lesbians as women and as lesbians casts them in a more disadvantageous position in civil society relative to gay men and feminist women. Therefore, lesbians have entered into the alternative public sphere through feminist and gay organizations. The first lesbian-only group, *Labrisz*, was established by lesbian members of *Háttér* in 1997 and is waiting for its legal registration.⁹

Lesbian and Gay Studies in Anthropological Theory and Research

In the contemporary social and cultural theory and research a cluster of salient and significant interdisciplinary fields have emerged in the last twenty years: lesbian and gay studies and queer studies. Lesbian and gay studies are concerned with lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, moreover, they analyze the various phenomena that transgress, challenge, and subvert the dominant gender and sexual binarisms. Anthropology has contributed to the shaping of these new fields of study by providing a spectrum of concrete, culturally and historically specific examples. With the emergence of (homo)sexuality as a subject of research, anthropology has also raised some theoretical questions.

The early occurrences¹⁰ and the general dismissal of the topics of transgendering and homosexuality in the social sciences in general and in anthropology in particular can be traced back to the pervasive Darwinian model of

⁸ *Sidra* has changed its name to *Kesergay*, but in the lesbian narratives it appears as *Sidra*, thus I use its former name.

⁹ See Chapter Three.

¹⁰ In the 1930s and 1940s the Culture and Personality School within anthropology, particularly Ruth Benedict and Alfred Kroeber studied the institution of *berdache* among North-American Indians. Both of them locate *berdache* in medical-psychological discourses, and regard it as a form of homosexuality. However, they point out that these cultures accept and institutionalize *berdache*, while Western cultures regard homosexuality as "abnormal" (Benedict 1935, Kroeber 1940).

gender binarism (Herdt 1994). Gender binarism not only divided the population into two mutually exclusive categories, men and women, according to their biological sexes, but also emphasized that the heterosexual relationship between the two sexes had a reproductive goal. The effects of this hegemonic discourse were twofold. First, those persons who deviate from the model were labeled, defined, and marginalized as *homosexuals* by medical and psychiatric discourses. Medical and psychiatric sciences thus monopolized the study of homosexuality, therefore, the subject of (homo)sexuality rarely appeared in other human sciences. Second, classical anthropology with its holistic perspective could not avoid the discussion of gender and sexuality when it analyzed family, kinship, and gender roles, but did not problematize the underlying binary model which it took at face value.

In the 1970's and 1980's anthropology opened up to contemporary philosophies and social sciences with several consequences. New thoughts and approaches (phenomenology, hermeneutics, Foucaultian constructivism, postmodern theories) permeated anthropological theory and challenged the hitherto stable self-definition of anthropology by blurring the fixed boundaries of the discipline. Social changes also influenced anthropology. The civil rights movements of the 1960's and 1970's made it possible for social groups that had been rendered muted and invisible to come out as subjects and/or objects of anthropological research. As a result, first symbolic, interpretive, and feminist anthropology, and then postmodern anthropology have interrogated and contested the dominant disciplinary paradigms, and have redefined and rearticulated the relationships among sex, gender, and (homo)sexuality in anthropology (Herdt 1994).

The above mentioned anthropological schools have approached the questions of transgendering and (homo)sexuality in several different ways. Following the empirical tradition in anthropology, long-term fieldwork projects have investigated the specific reconfigurations of gender and sexuality in their social and cultural contexts, while they have also offered some theoretical contributions to the discussion of the subject. Earlier ethnographies first studied non-Euro-American cultures illustrating that the initial anthropological interest in transgendering and homosexuality remained true to traditional anthropological fields of enquiry. These ethnographies¹¹ attempted to map gender and sexual varieties and specificities in various contexts, and tried to understand the dynamics of same-sex relations in various historical periods and cultures. Such cross-cultural studies have also criticized the use of umbrella terms, such as homosexuality, since they "can obscure more than illuminate" by imposing Eurocentric meanings of gender and homosexuality (e.g.: Weston 1993). They also traced those cultural beliefs, ideologies, and classifications that provided specific meanings to sex, gender, and sexuality in the given location, and helped to illuminate the particular configuration of gender and sexuality in the specific culture. This approach contributed to the constructivist understanding of transgendering and (homo)sexuality, and challenged the hegemonic binary discourse.

More recent ethnographies about European and American gay men and lesbian women raise new theoretical issues. The processes of gay and lesbian identity constructions, community formations, and identity politics can only be studied in

¹¹ See for example H. Whitehead, "The Bow and the Burden Strap: A New Look at Institutionalized Homosexuality in Native North America" (1981), R. N. Lancaster, "Subject Honor and Object Shame: The Construction of Male Homosexuality and Stigma in Nicaragua" (1988), or R. Grémaux, "Woman Becomes Man in the Balkans" (1994).

post-industrial contexts (Plummer 1995). Anthropologists have become sensitive not only to cultural differences, but to various differences within cultures. Esther Newton, for example, in her cultural history of Cherry Grove, Fire Island, investigates how race, ethnicity, religion, and class transform lesbian experiences in different historical periods, constituting shifting and multiple lesbian identities and cultures (Newton 1993). The attachment to difference offers further insights that difference exist not only between, say, heterosexual and lesbian women, but also within lesbian women, which demonstrates that the concept of lesbian is not unified, but multiple and fragmented.

More recent ethnographies have also raised the question of how dominant models of gender and sexuality are constructed and refigured by certain groups in society, and how the dominant and non-dominant discourses on gender and sexuality relate to one another. In their historical anthropological study of a working-class lesbian community in Buffalo, New York, Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy analyze butch/femme lesbian relationships which are often regarded as imitating the heterosexual role-model. However, the ethnographers point out that gendering of lesbian relationship reflects personal and political choices, and enable lesbian women to construct their public spaces in opposition to the heterosexual norm (Davis and Kennedy 1989). Kath Weston examines the discourse on families in gay and lesbian communities in San Francisco Bay Area. She argues that the families gay and lesbian individuals choose are reconfigurations of kinship ties which contest the cultural assumption that "biology" constitutes kinship, since gay families emphasize "choice" in the membership of families (Weston 1991).

Feminist Critique of Methodology and Epistemology

After having provided a theoretical framework for my study by pointing out the recurring themes and arguments in lesbian and gay ethnography, I turn to the discussion of feminist methodologies and epistemologies I have been employing in my research. My methods are not feminist *per se*, since there are no unique methods of inquiry to feminist social sciences, but they are carried out differently due to their different epistemological and methodological concerns (Harding 1987). Following Shulamit Reinharz, I see feminism as a perspective, which molds the methods traditionally used in anthropology (1992).

Modernist anthropology radically separates the researcher/subject and the researched/object and constitutes a hierarchical relationship between the two in order to construe disinterested, disembodied, rational, and objective knowledge. However, feminist social scientists criticize and challenge the positivist epistemology and methodology of traditional anthropology.¹² Feminists scrutinize the research situation, problematize the production of meaning, and challenge the necessity and possibility of objective approach (Ladner 1987). They locate themselves in the same critical plane as the participants of the research, and claim that the knowledge they produce is situated in and constituted by the intricate and complex relationships developed between the researcher and the people she works with (Smith 1987). Hence, feminist methodologies and epistemologies require self-reflexivity from the researchers to reveal their own positions, emotions, values, and

involvements within the processes of research and writing. The frank acknowledgment of positions, passions, and personal experiences that motivate the research and the personal relationships developed in the field reveal that both researcher and people involved are subjects in research, and the knowledge gained is partial, perspectivistic truths.

Nevertheless, Vicki Kirby, a postmodern feminist anthropologist is pessimistic about the success of decolonizing research and writing, since different modes of research and writing produce their object of knowledge differently, but they all imply power relations (Kirby 1992). The "breaking the silence" about lesbian ethnography, for example, reinforces and reproduces the colonizing effect of anthropological research (Weston 1993). Therefore, it seems impossible to avoid the interweaving of knowledge and power and to fully challenge the subject and object distinction in research and writing. By employing feminist methodologies, Kirby argues, we evoke some less obvious modes of authority.

In her discussion of lesbian ethnography, Ellen Lewin also points out that lesbian ethnographers often assume that they would benefit from a sense of shared identity if they work on lesbian and gay issues. However, research and writing produce differences between the ethnographer and the people she studies, "no matter how participatory her research technique" is (Lewin 1995: 327). Ethnic, racial, class, and generational differences can become meaningful between the researcher and research participants. The inequality of the research situation not only depends on the status of the anthropologist as researcher, but also on other aspects of her identity. Hence, Lewin interrogates the definition of lesbian

¹² Not only feminist anthropologists, but interpretive and postmodern anthropologists similarly

ethnography based on shared sexual identity, and reveals the shifting significance of lesbian identity in research. Nonetheless, she maintains that the ethnographic field is a site for the ethnographer's disclosure and redefinition of her identity.

Fieldwork: Setting and Methods

The research which forms the basis for this study was conducted in Budapest, Hungary in 1997-1999. Budapest as a metropolitan city provides several opportunities for lesbians to get-together in gay bars and nightclubs,¹³ in gay-friendly restaurants, in gay and feminist civil organizations, and during the lesbian-only *Labrisz* evenings. Although these public places are still limited in number and diversity, they offer a much wider scale of possibilities than elsewhere in the country. There are a couple of gay bars in larger cities throughout the country, but gay civil organizations do not exist there. Hence, some lesbians from outside Budapest who can afford and have access to the information show up in the monthly *Labrisz*-evenings and/or occasionally frequent gay bars in Budapest.

My anthropological fieldwork draws on a combination of qualitative research methods: participant observations, life-story interviews, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis. I did participant observations in the monthly lesbian meetings organized by the feminist-lesbian *Labrisz* group in order to develop strong rapport with the lesbian women and to reveal the workings of inclusions and exclusions among the different lesbian circles participating there. I have conducted ten

criticize modernist anthropology. See for example Rabinow (1977) and Clifford (1994).

¹³ A lesbian-only bar does not exist in Budapest, although there have been several initiatives to offer lesbian nights in gay bars or in heterosexual nightclubs. After a couple of lesbian-only nights, the bar owners stopped to offer these opportunities for lesbians because of low earnings.

narrative life-story interviews on lesbian coming-out stories and seven in-depth interviews on lesbian communities with lesbian women drawn from those attending the *Labrisz* group meetings in order to show how lesbian women represent and construct their identities and communities. In addition, I conducted archival research in the *Háttér (Background) Support Group for Gays and Lesbians* investigating media representations of lesbians on which the textual analysis in Chapter One relies.

My analysis in Chapter Two and Chapter Three draws heavily on the seventeen interviews I conducted. I contacted my first interview participants with the help of two people who are members of gay and feminist organizations. Then, I asked each woman interviewed for other potential participants, and they suggested names to me from among their friendship networks. This snowball sampling circumscribed those lesbian communities that I could reach, therefore, I mainly interviewed lesbians who are active members in various gay and feminist civil organizations. Later, my participation in the *Labrisz* meetings and the friendships I developed in the field helped me contact several lesbian women outside of the frameworks of feminist and gay groups. Five of these women gave me interviews and two women refused by saying that they were not interested in the proposed topics. My sample cannot claim to be representative of lesbian women living in Budapest or Hungary, and is biased toward lesbian political activists. The majority of interviewees were educated middle-class women, and only three of them were from working-class backgrounds and employed in working-class occupations. Three women claimed Jewish ethnic identity, and most of my interlocutors were white. Out of the seventeen interview participants nine women were between the age of

twenty and thirty, six were between the age of thirty and forty, and two were over forty.

The partiality of the sample reflects some aspects of my own identity and the personal relationships I developed in the field. I am a feminist woman from a white, middle-class background in my late twenties. Spending time and establishing friendships with lesbian women made me increasingly aware of the provisionality and contingency of my own sexual identity. Therefore, the field has also become a shifting site of my participant observation and personal involvement, of my outsider and insider positions.

In the study I regularly and extensively use quotations from the interview participants to expose their different experiences and perspectives. I selected the direct quotations from verbatim transcriptions of the interviews to show the occasional interruptions and difficulties of narrations. However, I chose and translated the quotations, and they thus most often illustrate my interpretations and are an example of a power relation between researcher and informant (Kirby 1993).

In accordance with the anthropological tradition, I use pseudonyms as requested by my interlocutors and to protect their identities, although there is one woman who was willing to give her full name with the reservation that it would not be published. I assign both first names and surnames to the interview participants following Kath Weston, who argues:

In a Western context, introducing strangers by given names alone paradoxically conveys a sense of intimacy while subtly withholding individuality, respect, and full adult status from research participants. Because

the same qualities are routinely denied to lesbians and gay men in society at large, the use of only first names can have the unintended consequence of perpetuating heterosexist assumptions (Weston 1991: 9).

Throughout my study I refer to "lesbians," although some of my interviewees do not feel comfortable with this terminology. One of the women claimed that the term lesbian still carries a new and unfamiliar resonance to her, and she prefers to call herself and to be called as a "woman who loves women." Her reservations about the term lesbian does not contest her identification, but conveys that the term has only been spread recently in Hungary.¹⁴ Another interlocutor asserted that she prefers the term *buzi* which has a "self-abusive" connotation. Her insistence on the term *buzi* challenges and subverts the effects of the violating, stigmatizing term of dominant society.¹⁵ All the other interview participants apply the term lesbian to define themselves, although they sometimes use it interchangeably with the term gay.

My discussion in the thesis proceeds in three sections. In Chapter One I explore the sporadic representations of lesbians in the Hungarian media. I argue that dominant representations of lesbians are ambivalent, since they provide visibility to lesbian persons and lives, but they produce and perpetuate cultural stereotypes about lesbians as well as reinscribe the lesbian images into dominant personalizing discourses of lesbianism. The stereotypic lesbian portrayals and the dominant

¹⁴ Further research is needed about the introduction and proliferation of the term lesbian in Hungary.

¹⁵ The term *buzi* applies to both gay men and lesbian women in Hungary. It is a demeaning, stigmatizing word of dominant society, but also used by lesbians and gays to label and define themselves. Its meaning comes closest to the term *queer*, but *buzi* does not convey those theoretical and political concerns *queer* has recently acquired in the United States. Therefore, I do not translate the term *buzi* throughout my text.

discourses form the context in which lesbians represent their selves and communities. In Chapter Two I focus on lesbian self-representations in coming-out stories. I examine how lesbians construct their identities in a way which renders their self-identification original, continuous, and totalizing. Lesbian self-representations overlap with dominant representations of lesbians in their essentializing claims, but they are also in conflict with the dominant representations. Coming-out narratives reveal that lesbian identities are produced and reproduced interactively through a very conflict-ridden, negotiated process. In Chapter Three I analyze narrative representations of lesbian communities. I argue that lesbian women seek connections and communities based on shared identity. However, the multiple forms of communities they create not only rest on common lesbian identity, but on differences among them which both unite and fragment lesbian networks and circles. The narratives about lesbian communities contest the implication of coming-out stories, that is, the totalizing self-identification, and illuminate the contradictory and complex construction of lesbian identities.

CHAPTER ONE

LESBIAN VISIBILITY IN DOMINANT TERMS: REPRESENTATIONS OF LESBIANS IN THE HUNGARIAN MEDIA BETWEEN 1989-1999

Budapest – Mari Bán (37) is a lesbian musician. Until 18 she did not even know whether she was a boy or a girl. At 6 she fell in love with a girl. In elementary and secondary school she played football with the boys, and dressed boyishly. While boys wanted to flirt with her, Mari courted girls. Even the psychologist could not change her.¹⁶

This remarkable annotation introduces a short article about a lesbian woman in a Hungarian daily tabloid newspaper, *Blikk*, in 1996. The first few sentences of the annotation reveal how troublesome it is to follow the dominant gender and sexual rules, to appropriate normative feminine and heterosexual subject positions. The last sentence, however, creates closure and reinscribes these norms and rules by displacing lesbianism into the mainstream psychological discourse. It fixes and excludes lesbianism as a deviant behavior, thus reproduces and maintains the social and symbolic boundaries between 'normal' and 'deviant,' 'heterosexual' and 'lesbian,' 'feminine' and 'masculine.'

The *Blikk* article is one among the sporadic representations of lesbians in the Hungarian media. Its representational strategy is not unique to this piece, but common in all of these media texts. On the positive side, they give occasional

visibility to lesbian persons and lives. But on the negative side, they also reflect and reinforce certain cultural stereotypes about lesbians as well as reinscribe them into dominant discourses of lesbianism. Such journalistic representations thus treat lesbianism ambivalently.¹⁷ As Robert Deming, a media theorist, points out concerning televisual representations of feminism: "Television packages oppositional values and repackages them within dominant terms" (1988: 155).

In this chapter I explore how Hungarian popular media depicts lesbianism. I focus on the representational practices which produce and reproduce lesbian stereotypes. I consider five popular media texts, and concentrate on the framing of the texts and phrasing of the points which restrict lesbian women's voices and explicitly or implicitly mobilize dominant discourses of lesbianism.¹⁸ These journalistic representations have appeared in the current political-economic transition of the country, in the contemporary historical period which provides the temporal scope for this chapter.¹⁹ Such stereotypes and discourses form and shape the context in which Hungarian lesbians live and love, and into which they come out and represent themselves.

¹⁶ The extracts in this chapter are direct quotations from the analyzed articles, a documentary book, and a television program. In all cases, the translation is my own.

¹⁷ In her analysis of the liberal-feminist HeartBeat television drama, Sasha Torres points out the similarly ambivalent representations of feminism: "even as these texts give space to 'positive' images of feminist discourse, politics, or persons, they are generally undercut such images narratively or visually" (1993: 178).

¹⁸ These five mass media texts are the only texts about lesbians that have appeared in Hungary. There are a couple of more texts that represent both gay men and lesbian women, other texts depict gays, bisexuals, and drags. However, I consider lesbian representations, thus I examine these five texts.

¹⁹ Before the democratization and liberalization of Hungarian society, only one feature film was made about lesbians by the Hungarian director, Károly Makk. The film, entitled *Looking at Each Other* came out in 1981. The film plays with the subject of crossing different boundaries, crossing political, gender, and country boundaries and borders, therefore, the film is embedded within and attempts to challenge the hegemonic discourses of the state-socialist regime. I briefly discuss the impact of the film on Hungarian lesbians in Chapter Two. After the breakdown of state-socialism in Hungary two lesbian novels were published. The first appeared under the title *Goat Rouge* and was written by Agáta Gordon in 1996, and the second was entitled *Idiot Indy* and was written by K. H. Inka in

These media texts are embedded in a broader political and cultural context that enables the emergence of lesbian visibility and its reinscription into dominant discourses. After the collapse of the state-socialist political system in Hungary, several grass-roots gay civil organizations have come into existence and provided space for politically conscious lesbians to enter and work in these organizations. However, these gay civil organizations are represented only by gay men in the mass media, and the politically active lesbians remain silent and invisible in public. A political television program, *Mélyvíz* (Deep Water),²⁰ in its discussion of homosexuality as a public issue, illustrates and explains this contradictory situation. In the program a woman from the audience called in and raised the question why the program presented only gay men. The interviewer told the audience that she tried to invite lesbian women, but they refused to take part in the program. The gay representatives gave some data on lesbian participation in gay civil organizations and their own initiatives, and they all agreed that public coming out was more difficult for lesbians in Hungary than for gay men. Gayle Rubin captures this difficulty in her theory of the double oppression of the lesbian subject, since lesbians are not only "oppressed as queers and perverts," but also as women (1993:33). Hence, asymmetrical representations appear in mass media: gay men talk about the social and political implications of homosexuality, whereas non-political lesbian women talk about their personal lives in the popular media. Therefore, the privacy of lesbians portrayed is violated and sustained: their personal circumstances are exposed as a public spectacle, and the hints of their personal stories are exploited to reflect already existing cultural stereotypes and/or to

1997. It is worth noting that both authors use pseudonyms. However, I do not discuss fictional

reinforce dominant discourses, but their social conditions and political participations are never articulated.

Eroticism in Representation of Lesbians

In 1989 the first documentary book on lesbian and bisexual women was published in Hungary. The book was written by a woman, Gyöngyvér Czére, who bases her stories on personal encounters and interviews. The title *Men Betrayed? Confessions of Lesbian and Bisexual Women* posits a close connection between the revelation of truth about lesbian and bisexual women and their relationship to men. The question mark leaves the meaning of this relationship open, but as the stories unfold we learn more about it as it becomes the center of the book. Here I focus on how lesbian and bisexual women are constructed in this text as sexually saturated figures and the way in which these women are objectified and exploited for male voyeurism.

Czére introduces her book with her personal encounters with lesbians. In the introduction under the title "Women wanted to love me..." she tells three stories of seduction by women she has experienced. Her first encounter, for example, occurred with a beautiful but mysterious friend whom she could not understand since she did not have a boyfriend. The mystery was revealed through a playful contest over whose body was more beautiful. The beauty competition between the two women in front of the mirror gradually turned into an erotic scene:

representations in this chapter.

²⁰ The TV program appeared on Channel 2 on February 28, 1998.

as she insisted on how well-shaped each of my bodyparts were, she touched me everywhere, took my breasts into her two hands and rubbed her thick, blond mount of Venus to me from the back (8).

Czére tried to resist the seduction by saying that only men were entitled to decide which female body was more attractive. The naive shock of the first meeting was overcome by the next two stories of seduction and refusal through which Czére became interested in writing a book about "women's physical and psychological problems who live non-traditional sexual lives" (19). The following stories convey similar textual strategies employed in her own stories: depiction of women's bodies, details of lesbian sexual lives, and appropriation of the male gaze.

Czére introduces all of her characters by fixing her gaze on their bodies. She meets her key informant in a Turkish bath, and the first image she provides about her is a detailed description of her body:

I also watched her thoroughly. I thought she was about forty, a little roundish, but her redundant kilos were evenly distributed on her body. Her breasts were very beautiful and heavy, her dark nipples were huge and hard. Her thighs and calves were well-shaped, and her fingernails on her feet were painted red (18).

She presents her lesbian interviewees opening the door for her as if they are expecting their lovers, and she turns her eyes on their inviting and attractive bodies in the same manner:

She opens the door in a black silk gown in a green-belt district of Buda; the silk trembles on her slim body, and reveals her beautiful, full figure: her slender waist, unusually opulent bosom, long thighs, and pear-shaped buttocks. Her face raises the interest of all men (107).

The lesbian bodies are aestheticized and eroticized through her almost undressing gaze. However, she repeatedly relies on men's valorization of the presented women's bodies, either on generic men as in the last quotation "Her face raises the interest of all men" or on concrete men sitting around her:

Her thin summer blouse is poked by her small teats, but these little teats end in huge, fingertip-sized nipples. The light fabric does not hide these bosoms, and the girl does not want to hide them either. The slim upper body continues in a vast buttock. She would not win a beauty contest, we are all in agreement ... "She is a disturbing and erotic figure" – the two men say (154).

Such a display of sensual and alluring lesbian bodies sets the tone for the narratives of lesbian sexual encounters. Czére reports sexual liaisons of lesbian and bisexual women in minute details. The blurb quotes one of the informants:

We were wriggling on the carpet in the hall, our clothes thrown all over the place; one of us always started to the room in order to continue our wonderful pleasure on the bed, but the other always stopped the body with kisses and

bites. It took us an hour until we could get into the bed in the room. It took us a long time, and I only remember that I bent down onto Ági's sour lap.

However, Czére does not only report but also watches lesbian sexual contacts. For instance, she meets two lesbian women in their apartment, who open the door in their loose gowns – a recurring erotic garment that lesbians wear in the book – and "on their languid faces I can see that they are 'afterwards.'" After one of them tells her story of becoming a lesbian masochist, she asks them if they will make love that night. She gets an affirmative answer, so she voices her will and desire to stay and watch them:

- You can even join us.
- Thanks, but I would rather not - I laugh. - But I would like to watch you if you didn't mind (104).

Although Czére does not offer an account about what she has seen, but her framing of the event raises erotic tension which enables her to describe a quasi-sexual scene in the next story. Here she depicts how her presence and the sexual encounters retold evoke sexual excitation in her interviewee:

- I remember everything. [her informant finishes her detailed story of sex]

You have beautiful legs, Gyönyvér. Do you allow me to touch them?

I blush and withdraw my armchair. But I tell her suddenly, even to my own surprise: If it is good for you, touch my legs. But you have to understand that

I won't let you do anything else. I don't have such a desire, I can't help it
(116).

Czére thus allows herself to be touched again and again throughout her interview, always a little more before she would refuse her informant completely.

The text is thus pervaded by the author's play of seduction and refusal, and the discourse of voyeurism. Through her play of seducing and refusing lesbian and bisexual women, she keeps her interviewees in constant erotic tension. In this way she can both extract stories of sexual encounters from her interviewees and assume a superior position as a heterosexual woman. She thus appropriates the gaze of a "male voyeur-cum-lover,"²¹ and objectifies lesbian bodies and lesbian erotics. In her textual construction lesbian and bisexual women become oversexualized, which implies that their relationships are solely based on passion and erotics. Such a portrayal reduces lesbianism into sexuality and sexuality into sexual acts.

Careful Talk - Protecting Whom?

Sándor Friderikusz has chosen an interesting topic for his talk-show tonight, "Women Who Love Women." The program is advised to our audience over 18. For your benefit we would like you to take our request seriously at this time. Thank you.

²¹ Margaret Jolly uses the term in her article (1997).

This careful announcement took place on television right before the *Friderikusz Talk Show* about lesbian women which appeared on the Hungarian Television in April 14, 1995. The *Friderikusz Talk-Show* is the most popular prime-time talk show in Hungary, usually covers entertaining topics, but occasionally broadcasts stories of minorities to create tolerance towards difference. In the following I will analyze the careful framing of the show and the triadic setting of the lesbian guests through which the topic becomes accessible to the straight audience, since they reflect on and perpetuate already existing cultural stereotypes about lesbians.

The show begins with the host's, Sándor Friderikusz's careful introduction:

Although we will encounter life-stories as usual, the narrators are disguised at this time – they appear under fictitious names, in different outfits, and with different voices.

The host explains that the guests are not only disguised upon their requests, but because "I would like to protect them from us, from everyday atrocities." Although by inserting "us" into his sentence, Friderikusz emphasizes the general social hostility towards lesbians and his responsibility in discussing this attitude, but his following sentence undercuts this message: "the law appreciates them and the society is tolerant and accepting towards them, but certain persons sometimes are not." He thus slips from the social/general to the personal/particular instances of intolerance towards lesbians. Friderikusz paraphrases the careful announcement which took place before the show and which set apart this particular program from any other television program advised for adults, implying its influential and

dangerous character. The host thus also advises the viewers to switch channels if they consider it important that their children do not hear about the issue for the first time from this program. These careful introductory remarks create distance between the lesbian subjects and the viewers by exoticizing and othering lesbian women, and assuming that there are no lesbians among the viewers.

Disguising has a similar distancing effect, furthermore, it does not meet its purpose of protecting the guests' privacy. During the last interview a film clip is shown which resonates with the topic discussed. The protagonists appear with their names and faces in the film clip, and they become easily recognizable among the interview participants. Such a mistake raises the question: who is the intended target of the paternalistic discourse on protection?

An opinion poll shot in the streets of Budapest follows the introductory remarks, and it is interpreted by the host as "Hungarian society is pleasantly tolerant." However, the answers were quite different, ranging from hatred such as "unnatural," "unreproductive," "strange," through open rejection by emphasizing that "women should love men and men should love women," to acceptance by saying that "it is normal, although unusual." The light interpretation of the poll exempts the audience and the viewers from social responsibility, from recognizing and understanding lesbian difference, since it claims that these are already existing phenomena in Hungary.

The careful introduction, the disguises, and the opinion poll serve a double purpose. They protect the audience and the viewers in their indifference and nonrecognition more than the lesbians themselves, as well as providing a frame for introducing the personal lives of the guests. As intolerance towards lesbians is

defined as personal and particular, lesbianism is also presented as a personal and particular issue.

The guests are grouped together in a triadic setting to embody three stereotypes. The first three interviewees talk about their sexuality, and present a relatively positive image of lesbianism. The first person is introduced as "Casanova," and identifies with the traditional male role of treating women as "goddesses." Her main concern is her accomplishments in quantity and quality of women. The host is specifically interested in her promiscuous "hunting instincts," her strategies of approaching beautiful heterosexual women, and her efficiency. Friderikusz presents the next two interviewees, a lesbian couple, by saying that "they have one thing in common in their life-stories: they both had an abortion." The host implies that abortion is the cause of shifting their identity from straight to lesbian. They both turn to women, to each other, because "men could not show anything new after some time," whereas "my partner would like me to feel good, and I would like her to do the same." The host is curious to know if they have a certain role pattern in their household, but both of them respond negatively. Neither Casanova nor the lesbian couple has come out to others as lesbians.

The next two guests are presented as problematic cases. The fourth person is a pre-operative transsexual woman-to-man. She is attracted to feminine heterosexual women and acts as a cavalier with her partners. Her previous four partners broke up with her, because they could not wait for the surgery that would make her a "man in appearance, not only in soul." In her close environment some people accept her, but others do not, however, she concludes that people are tolerant, since she does not act conspicuously. The fifth person was a promising swimmer and then a

waterpolo player but her sports career broke three times as her lesbianism was not tolerated by the swimmers, the waterpolo players, and then by the Sports University she attended. Although she has not come out to others directly, she has never "made a secret" about her identity. She is under psychological treatment now, since she could not solve her problems by herself and could not turn to her parents for help either.

The last example brings reconciliation for the audience and presents a couple who have been together for several years. One of the women has two children who are being brought up by them together. The host is basically interested in lesbian mothering. They assertively argue that their relationship is not different from a "normal family." Their sex is a private matter and takes place in the bedroom, thus the children would not see anything that would not happen between "normal" women friends living in the same apartment. The children ask sometimes why their father would not live with them, but they never ask for another man.

The show thus presents lesbians as peculiar personalities. Although it seems that we get a diverse picture of lesbianism, these images are used to maintain and perpetuate various lesbian stereotypes. We learn that lesbians are either promiscuous or leave behind men out of negative experience and disappointment. Others are victimized for their difference and presented as in need of medical or psychological treatment. Still others consider their lesbianism as a private matter confined to their bedroom. These portrayals not only leave the existing stereotypes unquestioned, but they do not interrogate social acceptance/refusal of lesbianism either. Although the host always asks the guests about their coming out, he only deals with it in detail in the case of the sportswoman. Yet, her example remains in isolation and finds

reconciliation in psychotherapy, which presents social rejection and exclusion as the victim's fault. This implication is even reinforced by the pre-operative transsexual woman-to-man, who claims that she is accepted by others because of her proper behavior.

The two experts, who were also invited onto the show, are supposed to raise the social and political aspect of the subject. The sociologist László Tóth engages only in medical and psychological discourses on lesbianism, although he states that homosexuality does not have a scientifically proven explanation. Hence, none of the experts provide any alternative, social constructivist or deconstructivist understanding of lesbianism. The popular talk-show presents its subject in a very agreeable, easily digestible, and possibly entertaining way in order to meet the interests of straight spectators. The host closes the show by stressing that the people presented and their way of life "of course" should not be taken as a model, reiteratively protecting his audience and reinforcing heterosexuality as the norm.

Reinscribing Lesbians into Psychological Discourse

I return to the *Blikk* article on lesbianism mentioned in my introductory sentences to this chapter and examine in greater detail how the text displaces the lesbian subject into psychological discourse. The article appeared with the headline "Came out anxiously: she loves women. It is not easy for lesbians to meet each other" in a Hungarian daily tabloid newspaper, *Blikk*, in May 15, 1996. The headline and the subheading promise to deliver two topics: the difficulties of coming out as a lesbian and the difficulties of meeting other lesbian women.

As the short article unfolds, we learn that Mari Bán's coming out to her father was easy, since he claimed that he also loved women, while it was difficult to her mother, who could not accept "her daughter being different." The following sentence "Ever since Mari brings her girlfriends to her parents for dinner at every family occasions" brings reconciliating closure to the conflicts of coming-out, reinscribing it into heteronormative family life without raising questions about silences within the family or further confrontations and negotiations to overcome these silences.

In the second part of the article Mari points out the difficulties of meeting other lesbians, since there are only rare occasions to meet each other, but the article does not explain why it is so. The article ends with a statement "Therefore they would like to set up a lesbian journal, and organize cultural forums and meetings," which conveys the possibilities and promises of grass-roots lesbian organizations without re-connecting civil lesbian activities to the difficulties of lesbian coming out. The article thus creates lacunae wherever social aspects could emerge, presenting coming out to parents and meeting other lesbians as easily resolvable problems, in the past or near future, and as the personal problems of lesbians.

The last sentence "Even the psychologist could not change her" reappears as a caption under a photograph of Mari Bán: "Mari Bán could not be changed fundamentally by the psychologist either." These two sentences render the lesbian topic easily accessible to straight readers: they reduce and fix lesbianism as a psychological problem which not only essentializes and obscures, but pathologizes lesbian difference. Reinscribing lesbians into the psychological discourse frames the

article and underlines the journalistic representation of coming out and meeting lesbians as the personal problems of lesbians.

Under the headline between the annotation and the photograph a text marked by a separate frame reports that the constitutional committee of the Parliament has passed an Act to modify the interpretation of partnership: not only between "woman and man", but "between persons." This report makes the lesbian issue relevant at the time of the article's publication, it alludes to questions of lesbian and gay civil rights in Hungary. However, the report remains within its typographic and narrative frame without any direct connection to the article. Disconnecting the legal and the psychological/personal spheres helps the article to constantly divert from revealing the social hostility towards lesbians, from representing the social conditions of lesbian coming out and meetings.

Politics Happens Elsewhere

The Hungarian edition of *Cosmopolitan* published a four-page article about lesbians in May 1999. The article introduces the historically shifting social interpretations of homosexuality and lesbian and gay identity politics. However, according to this journalistic piece, lesbian and gay identity politics emerge only in the West. In the following I analyze the textual strategies that help to dislocate lesbian and gay identity politics and disconnect politics from the lesbian women's lives presented in the article.

The title "Girls in minority. Cosmo about lesbians" creates distance between the magazine and lesbian women. The article continuously talks about lesbians in

the third person plural which reinforces the distance created by the title. The female journalists presume that there are no lesbians among their readership, thus the magazine and the readers can assume a dominant heterosexual position which excludes and objectifies lesbians. Furthermore, calling lesbian women "girls" infantilizes the lesbian subjects. The visual image opposite to the front-page of the article depicts an "Yves Saint Laurent Pour Homme" advertisement with a full picture of a man looking down onto the article and its visual claim of two women dancing with each other. The advertisement fits well into the profile of the magazine, nevertheless, the intrusion of the male gaze conveys voyeurism that further objectifies lesbianism.

Victims of insufficient development? Childhood trauma diverted their destiny?

Or normal people? Like you, me, s/he, anyone?

The medical and psychological discourses on lesbianism creep into the lead that introduces the text, and lesbians are thus contrasted to "normal people" – the readership and the authors. The question marks intend to challenge the dichotomy of "normal" and "deviant," "we" and "they," and suggest the possibility of interpreting lesbian lives as recognized and acceptable. Nevertheless, the article provides only a few examples full of clichés detached from the various political discourses on lesbianism deployed in the article which attempt to interrogate compulsory heterosexuality.

The article begins with three examples which reiterate some of the lesbian stereotypes examined in other media texts. The first example introduces Erzsi and

Erika "who live like a regular married couple." Accordingly, the journalists raise their expectations: "Becoming a family? Adopting a child? Or fading as a spinster?" We receive contradictory messages about their relationship to their lesbian identity: "If somebody asked about their sexual orientation, they would shrug their shoulders: 'We were born like this, that is all.'" The lightness of this statement and its implication of their coming out is in conflict with the following description of their passing as heterosexual women:

They do not touch each other in front of others. They always have something to add to the everlasting topic of male-female relationship, although they have been attracted to girls in all their lives.

However, we do not find out anything about how they think and feel about their passing as straight and silencing their lesbian identity. We get the impression that their closeted identity entitles them to fit into the category of "regular married couple" as if heterosexuality was not visible outside of the bedroom. This portrayal reproduces lesbianism as a private matter.

The first information we learn about the next person, Vali, is that she is "mad for sex." She personifies the recurring figure of the sexually saturated lesbian image in this article.

She is beautiful and entertaining, so she is always able to pick up someone.

Dor a one-night stand, for a week, for half a year. She prefers to target couples, open or ready for opening relationships. She quickly neutralizes the

male partner who has fainted in ecstasy, and focuses her hypnotic power onto the woman.

The erotic language depicting her seductions reduces Vali into someone only driven by her passions and desires. The description also reduces the heterosexual couples into passive objects, the mere objects of Vali's superhuman spell. Vali does not identify herself as lesbian, "since beyond the bed she takes a place in the world of men and women as her female companions with more prosaic fantasy." The article does not problematize the difference between homosexual acts and identifications.

The third example presents a lesbian couple, Teri and Piri, whose identities have shifted from straight to lesbian in their lives.

Both of them are beyond a couple of men, a couple of marriages.

Independently from each other, they grew out of the roles of fresh wives and irreplaceable secretaries. Teri dived into the feminist-lesbian literature, and was glad to find views that related to her own. Piri dropped into a lesbian community while traveling in Denmark and took up their lesbian views. When they met each other, two women already committed to lesbian ideas shook hands.

Although it seems that they are politically conscious lesbians, the article does not reveal whether they are activists in Hungary and what they strive for. Their feminist-lesbian ideas are thus described as personal endeavors through which they can relate to each other, but do not have any manifestations outside of their

relationship. Moreover, their conviction is presented as some ethereal power which enable them to be completely detached from their bodily desires:

They are indifferent to sex. They can afford to have a platonic relationship.

Beyond the stereotypical portrayals of lesbians, beyond the recurring images of lesbianism as a private matter, of the sexually saturated lesbian figure, and the newly introduced political lesbians who only employ politics in their personal lives, the article implicitly presents various conceptions of lesbianism through the examples. The first couple understands their lesbianism in essentialist terms as innate, given, and eternal, the second example reveals the difference between homosexual acts and lesbian identity, and the third couple understands their lesbian identity as arbitrary and shifting.

The second part of the article lists various discourses on lesbianism: common sense, scientific, and political discourses. The journalists attempt to locate the examples within the first two of these understandings of lesbianism:

According to the common understanding [lesbian] is a woman who looks for sexual pleasure with other women. It is refuted both by Vali's and Teri/Piri's examples.

As the authors could not place all the examples within the common sense discourse, they turn to the medical discourse on the subject:

The person is either born as heterosexual or homosexual, which corresponds to the self-representation of Erzsi and Erika, but reduces Vali into a statistical mistake.

After deploying the dominant discourses on lesbianism, the journalists summarize the historically shifting political discourses of gay and lesbian movements: homophile, gay liberation, and queer movements. They also mention that we could not talk about lesbian movements and lifestyles until after the Stonewall Riot in 1969. In brackets between dashes we learn that

(the carnevalesque Gay Pride Day commemorates this event which gay people celebrate in Western cities every summer – and for a couple of years in Hungary, too, though in a more modest manner).

The informative article also tries to disclose reasons for the gay and lesbian political struggles. The text describes how homosexuality was first considered a sin and therefore it was criminalized, then it was seen as a sickness, whereas recently more gays and lesbians are stigmatized as "deviants from the norm." When it comes to Hungary, though, the journalists rely on some statistics about the general perception of homosexuality. The article tells the readers that Hungarian society is tolerant. One wonders whether tolerance is understood in an abstract, statistical sense, since if we juxtapose tolerance to the presented examples of lesbian women, the closeted lesbian identity and lesbian politics as a personal endeavor become unintelligible. Nevertheless, we get the impression that there is no need for lesbian politics in

Hungary, and accordingly, the journalists do not include any information about lesbian initiatives and gay civil organizations taking place in the country. Therefore, the article presents Hungarian lesbians as stereotypical examples who can be located more or less in dominant discourses of lesbianism, whereas the social conditions and political participation of lesbians are represented only in their Western context.

Giving Voice to Lesbians

I finish with an article published in a women's magazine entitled *Voilà* in December 1996. This popular magazine is affiliated with a German counterpart and is an expensive magazine mostly targeting business women. This article is unique in its attempt to let lesbian women talk and represent themselves. In this way the frame of the article does not overdetermine its content, and the article can point out the social conditions of lesbian coming out and their political initiatives. I focus on the framing of the article, and on the themes and arguments through which lesbian women present themselves.

The title "Girls who Love Girls" is a familiar one, it echoes the title "Women Who Love Women" of the *Friderikusz Talk Show* discussed earlier in the chapter. However, shifting the terms from "women" to "girls" conveys the infantilization of lesbian subjects and the deprivation of their responsibility, just as in the *Cosmopolitan* article. The paternal authority thus created is in conflict with the content of the text which provides space for lesbian self-representation without reproducing cultural stereotypes on lesbianism.

They are many but only a few come out in public, since society has reservations and aversions against them. They claim that they are people like everyone, but their sexuality is different. Some confessions follow.

The lead promises to discuss the difficulty of lesbian coming out conditioned by social attitudes towards lesbians and which the lesbian informants will present in some detail. The article begins with a short interview with the sexologist László Tóth. He sets the context for the construction of lesbian identities within the changes in gender roles, the emergence of the "new woman," and the first wave of feminism at the turn of the century. Although Tóth suggests that lesbianism is socially embedded, he does not directly connect it to the current Hungarian context.

The two interviewees, Andrea Krizsó and Ágnes P. present themselves through their coming out: coming out to themselves and to others. Andrea Krizsó asserted her lesbian identity when she fell in love with a woman at the university. She has come out to some and remains closeted to others, since she has met stigmatizations:

If I walk with my girlfriend holding hands on the streets, men often call us *buzi*. There are some who are shocked, cannot or do not want to accept us, and there are others for whom it does not cause a problem.

Ágnes P. came to terms with her lesbian identity when she was in her adolescence, however, it took her a long time before she could come out to others. First, she decided to devote her life to a scientific career denying her sexuality completely,

but then she realized that she also has rights for her sexual life. She came out to her friends in her thirties through her poetry, then she came out to a wide public when one of the gay organizations was established. She says that coming out is especially difficult in the countryside in Hungary, where "homosexuality is the object of ridicule and contempt." Among her lesbian friends very few have families who accept their daughters' lesbianism, and they consider homosexuality as a family secret. Ágnes P. regards Hungarian society and media as "strongly rejective." One of the obstacles of coming out for lesbians, she mentions, is the lack of information about harmonious gay lives. In her gay organization, the members try to introduce such lives in public circulation which would empower gays and lesbians and support their coming out. She concludes with a positive perspective:

According to human dignity we are people as anyone, even though our sexuality is different. Until we do receive respect, we have to organize ourselves. Although this process has been broken, but a new generation is now emerging for which these things do not cause such a trouble as they did for us.

The article thus effectively challenges the point that the *Friderikusz Talk Show* and the *Cosmopolitan* article try to make according to which Hungarian society is tolerant. Here the two lesbian women reveal the social conditions of their coming out, and the social intolerance they and others experience by claiming a lesbian identity. Moreover, the *Voilà* article also contests the implication of the previous texts according to which lesbians are apolitical or do not take part in politically

oriented gay civil organizations. However, the text reduces lesbianism to sexuality and asserts that lesbians are only different in their sexual lives. This portrayal obscures once more the complexity of lesbian difference and treats sexuality as a private matter. The stereotypic image of lesbianism as a bedroom matter is transformed into the political discourse of liberalism, the right to privacy.

Conclusion

During one of the monthly *Labrisz*-meetings in May 1999, lesbian participants briefly discussed lesbian representations in the media and focused on the recently published *Cosmopolitan* article. Most of the women who took part in the discussion agreed on the fact that it is important for lesbians to have some visibility in the media, but they were surprised to read the portrayals of lesbian women in the text. Some women interrogated the "truth" of the images by saying that the lesbians introduced in the article are not "real persons" and they cannot be recognized.

In this chapter I have formulated my arguments not in relation to the "truth" or "reality" of the lesbian examples, but in relation to the representational practices most of these popular media texts employ in order to both reassert already existing lesbian stereotypes and dominant discourses on lesbianism and shape the public perceptions of lesbians. I have thus focused on textual analysis without paying attention to media production and consumption which envelope these media texts (Ang and Hermes 1991, Spitulnik 1993). However, my aim has been to point out how Hungarian popular journalistic representations construct lesbians in an ambivalent way by giving visibility to fragments of lesbian lives, and invisibility to

social intolerance towards lesbians, to the nonrecognition of lesbian difference and to lesbian politics in Hungary.

The examination of the images and texts of popular media reveals how social asymmetries are produced and reproduced. Stuart Hall claims that "stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power" (1997: 258). He understands power in symbolic terms, "the power to represent someone or something in a certain way – within a certain 'regime of representation,'" and he asserts that representations are inevitably implicated in relations of power (Hall 1997: 259). Through the textual practices of objectifying, distancing, othering, exoticizing, disconnecting, and closure, the dominant Hungarian media representations of lesbians attempt to reduce and restrict the meanings of lesbians into certain demeaning cultural stereotypes. Three recurring figures of lesbians are constructed and become pervasive in these texts: the sexually saturated figure, the pathologized lesbian, and the couple who regard their lesbianism as a bedroom matter. These stereotypic cultural representations not only fix the meanings of lesbianism, but also maintain the hegemony of heterosexuality and devalue lesbianism.

The pervasive popular genre of the analyzed media texts sets limits for the possibilities of representations of lesbians. The genre engenders particular textual mechanisms that are partially responsible for selecting certain fragments of lesbian personal lives and anchoring them within disparaging stereotypes and dominant discourses. However, there is one article of the same journalistic genre which gives enough space and voice for the lesbian women interviewed to represent themselves. This text challenges the reductionism of lesbian stereotypes of the other articles, and

reveals the social hostility towards lesbian women and introduces the political initiatives of Hungarian lesbians. Yet, this journalistic representation remains within the confines of a normalizing discourse by asserting that lesbians are only different in their sexuality. Here the image of lesbianism as a private matter recurs, but it is reinterpreted in terms of the liberal political discourse, the right to privacy.

However, the normalizing discourse does not recognize and acknowledge the complexity of lesbian difference. At this point the normalizing discourse overlaps with the minoritizing discourse of psychopathologizing and oversexualizing lesbianism, since both discourses define sexuality as personal and private, either a minimal or a maximal defining feature of lesbians, and not as a cultural production and effect, implicated in the relations of power that permeate societies (Foucault 1978). Like Stuart Hall, I also argue for the importance of a politics of representation – "the way meaning can be struggled over, and whether a particular regime of representation can be challenged, contested, and transformed," and the lesbian self-representations discussed in the following chapters try to achieve (Hall 1997: 8).

CHAPTER TWO

LESBIAN SELF-REPRESENTATIONS

IN COMING-OUT STORIES

Four years ago when I talked to older lesbians and gays about my problems, about my anxiety of how to come out to my parents and what others would say if they found it out, they told me they faced these problems when they were forty - fifty years old, and they went to see the psychologist when they were twenty-eight, and tried to commit suicide, and they could only accept themselves afterwards. But recently, for example, a fifteen year old girl called us that she came out to her parents, and we started to say to each other that times are changing, and she has similar problems at the age of fifteen than we had when we were twenty, and then we realized that older lesbians and gays had told us the same.

Sára Kecskés is a self-identified lesbian woman volunteering for *Háttér* (*Background*) *Support Group for Gays and Lesbians*, a civil organization which has launched the first telephone helpline for gays and lesbians in Hungary. She reflects on the rapid changes in lesbian coming out — claiming lesbian identity to self, to straight family and friends, and to gay acquaintances²² — and points out that lesbian women are coming out in greater numbers and at an earlier period in their lives than ever before. The emergence and proliferation of lesbian coming-out stories depend on the communities that create and hear these stories (Plummer 1995). In the

current democratization of Hungarian society, the first gay and lesbian cultural, social, and political institutions and initiatives were able to evolve and gain some visibility on the periphery of hegemonic society and dominant culture.²³ These institutions and initiatives facilitate the formation of lesbian circles and communities which produce and consume lesbian coming-out stories in Hungary.

In this chapter I focus on Hungarian lesbian coming-out narratives in their dual, although entwined sense, both as an evolving process of identification and as a reiterative and shifting everyday practice. First, lesbian coming-out stories are long journeys of self-discovery and proclaiming a lesbian identity to oneself and to others. Through coming-out narratives lesbians "recast their own past experiences to bring them in line with their current identities" (Esterberg 1997). They create linear, causal, and sequential stories from past confusions to present acceptance, affirmation, and disclosure of lesbian identities. Lesbians thus produce "true-self" narratives which render their lesbianism essential and unchanging, something to be discovered rather than constructed and performed (Esterberg 1997, Plummer 1995).

Coming out as a lesbian is furthermore a site of repetition, an endless series of performative acts through which lesbians rework their abjection into agency. Judith Butler defines compulsory heterosexuality as an oppressive regime of power which works "through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects - abjects, we might call them - who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law" (1993: 312). Within the heterosexual matrix, lesbianism is thus constituted as excluded, culturally unintelligible abject. However, the repetitive disclosures of lesbian

²² I analyze coming out to self and to straight family and friends in this chapter, and discuss coming

identity to others refute the shaming and exclusionary deployments of the term, reverse the term of violation against its violating aims, and resignify abjection into culturally intelligible and legitimate agency. Coming out is thus a reiterative and rearticulative practice which enables and produces a lesbian agency, an agency which is conditioned and implicated in the very regime of power it tries to resist (Butler 1993).

In the following I analyze how lesbians represent and construct their identities in life-story narratives through deploying recurring stories. These stories provide opportunity for some of their experiences to appear and for other aspects of their lives to disappear in the narratives. The narrators represent themselves in the framework of two recurring stories: they tell coming-out stories and stories of attraction and affection which meet at certain points and divide elsewhere. Here I deal with coming-out stories, though it is sometimes impossible to avoid alluding to stories of attraction and affection. Throughout the coming-out stories lesbians try to introduce continuity, cut a path in the midst of their diverse experiences in order to reinterpret their life-stories in terms of their current lesbian identities and to give coherence to life experiences and identities. Lesbian identities are invented and reinvented in the coming-out stories lesbians construct for themselves (Weeks 1995). They thus compose their narratives along circumscribed and continuous themes: they talk about feeling different, about conflicts of gender and sexuality in heterosexual relationships, about coming out to oneself, about looking for cultural examples, and about coming out to others.

out to gay and lesbian communities in Chapter Three.

²³ The particular institutions and initiatives are discussed in the Introduction and in Chapter Three.

Lesbians share their coming-out stories in their communities. The exchanged life-stories thus meet others' life-stories and elements which confirm their lesbian identities enter into their own personal life-stories. Lesbians therefore tend to articulate their experiences through similar stories, similar themes, and similar forms. Standard themes and forms of coming-out narratives are created and recreated. The normative discourse on lesbian coming out thus emerge in lesbian communities. Nevertheless, normative discourses on coming out not only homogenizes the life-stories and totalizes lesbian identities, but can also point out differences among lesbian women. In general, however, the recurring and common themes in the life-stories tell little about the complex and complicated personal stories which lie beyond the narratives, since they are selective and concise, thus they follow the general rules of narration (Sommers 1994).

I base my analysis in this chapter on life-story interviews conducted with different lesbian women: with lesbians who trace their lesbian story back to their childhood or puberty and those who define their lesbianism later as an adult; with lesbians young and old; with lesbians who are attracted only to women and those who are also attracted to men; with lesbians who find lesbian and gay communities and those who live as lesbians in other subcultural surroundings; with lesbians who are political and those who are non-political. Lesbians themselves differentiate between feminist and non-feminist, political and non-political lesbians, as well as between lesbian identities that are traced back to childhood or puberty and those constructed as an adult.²⁴ It is therefore the case that the standard form and themes of coming-out stories only enable some differences to become visible, and other

differences, such as ethnic, class, and religious differences remain invisible.

Lesbian identities constructed in and through the coming-out narratives "suggest a provisional totalization" of lesbian identities and exclude other aspects of identities (Butler 1993: 309).

The narrative life-story interview²⁵ I employed for this research leaves space for the interview participants to articulate their life-stories freely without the interruption of the researcher. Therefore, the interviewees compose their own narratives, raise the themes, and introduce the time-sequence. In the beginning of the interviews I asked them to tell their life-story and said that I was interested in lesbian lives in Hungary. After their narratives I asked them further questions about the themes they raised. The interview participants followed the standard structure of coming-out narratives: feeling different, coming out to self, and coming out to others. Most of the interviewees pointed out the importance of cultural and personal examples. Although coming out to straight friends and lesbian communities were discussed by all, coming out to straight family was sometimes a theme not included in their first narrative, so I raised questions about claiming lesbian identity in their biological family.

Feeling Different

Common in the interviews is the search for some evidence or source of their lesbian identities through which lesbians locate and mark an experience which they interpret

²⁴ See Chapter Three about the differences in lesbian communities, such as differences between political and non-political, feminist and non-feminist lesbian women.

²⁵ About the method of narrative life-story interviews see Kovács-Vajda (1994, 1996) and Rosenthal (1994).

as the first sign of their lesbianism retrospectively, though they did not define their experience or themselves as lesbians at that time. Feeling different from others is rendered significant and meaningful in this framework, and revolves around two axes, the axis of gender and sexuality. Some of them disclose that they were "boyish,"²⁶ while others narrate that they felt attraction and affection towards their same-gender teachers and peers. These two revelations sometimes come together, but most of the time they divide. Lesbians who start their stories with their "boyishness" recall some early experiences in their childhood, whereas those women who emphasize their attraction to other women introduce their stories with their adolescence.

Berta Tóth, who is in her early thirties, talks about being a "beautiful little girl," although she preferred "boyish" games and clothes in childhood which her family defined as different:

I have known it since I was 6, and of course consciousness is different at that time than now when the person is sort of calm about it and knows what it is, but I feel that I knew it in a very early period, not that I was *buzi*, but that I was different somehow, because I didn't like the pink spotted dresses, and I really hated skirts, I really hated playing with dolls, and if for no other reason but for this the child thinks that she is different, because they ask her why she chooses the gun again in the toyshop, and I get the stupid dolls from the grandfathers, and I don't play with them, so they express that the person is different.

²⁶ Tracing the stories back to "boyishness" in childhood does not have a direct correlation with the

Betti Szűcs, who is in her mid-twenties, talks about her being mistaken as a boy and about her preference to "boyish" games:

In my childhood I already felt different than others (...) they always thought that I was a boy and I was on better terms with boys than with girls, and I only had a couple of girlfriends. I also had these boyish obsessions, so for example I was always envious for the boy living next door who had so many matchboxes, and then I asked for one, so I had one with which you cannot do much, but I was very proud to have one.

Ágnes Nagy, who is in her late-thirties, draws attention to how her mother interpreted her behavior as "boyish:"

My mother was a little more normal then, because she said that you are boyish, it is all right, so I could play, I didn't understand why there were boyish games and girlish games, so after a while I felt I was a boy, I played whatever boys played. These things were completely nonsense then, they fucked my life up, if I didn't understand something, why they didn't explain it, or they did and said that it was because it wasn't proper. I thought that someone is either a boy or a girl, but there I was, and for a while I was all right when I was still a child. They tried to do something against it, but they

also thought that it was cool, witty, and independent. But I was a girl, and I should have been like that. In gymnastics I had to be among the girls, though.

The three stories reveal that the women felt different in their early childhood because their families implicitly or explicitly communicated to them their lack of gender conformity, their transgression of gender binarism. They developed a strong sense of difference, since they did not approximate and appropriate the expected feminine norms and rules.

Other lesbians trace their stories back to their first emotional and sexual attractions to their female teachers and girlfriends. The interview participants do not consider their crushes on teachers as the first "sign" of their lesbian experience, nevertheless, they mention them in their coming-out stories. Anna Szabó, who is in her early twenties, regards these feelings as common to all adolescents and as a transitional phase in her life:

Well, my first emotional experience that I would call lesbian now happened when I was 13-14, I fell deeply in love with one of my teachers. When I was in love with my teacher very much, I thought that this is a love general in puberty, in which more or less everybody falls in and loves a teacher or somebody older than her, so I made it clear to myself naturally that I would grow out of it.

Mária Nemes, who is in her forties, evaluates her love towards her teacher similarly:

Now I can't decide whether earlier signs, for example, I was in love with my teacher in elementary school, but I think nearly every child is in love with her teacher, so I don't consider it as a sign.

However, narrators consider their attractions to their peers as the first clue for their lesbianism retrospectively. Zsófia Molnár, who is in her early twenties, talks about her first crush on her best friend:

In secondary school I was in love with a girl, we were in very good terms, very good friends, and I remember once she asked whether we were *buzi*, and I only laughed and said that this is not it - I did not know that this is it.

They were also aware that their attractions are irreconcilable with the expected and dominant sexual norms and rules. Ágnes Nagy, for example, tried to overcome this discrepancy by developing hopes and fantasies:

It wasn't clear to me how it was, since there was no possibility of a girl with a girl in my mind, there was no example or if there was it was clear to me I remember that there is no such thing, it was not allowed or something, I knew it well that I was in love with girls, (...) I must be a boy somehow, I thought, but there was no example that a girl becomes a boy, so I know I had hopes that I would be a boy, it is impossible that I was in love with girls and remain

a girl, so I remember I had hopes that it will turn out somehow, (...) I will wake up one morning and be a boy.

Mária Nemes tells about similar fantasies:

In that class a lot of girls dated boys, and I liked a girl very much, I often visited her at her place, and she was a friend of mine, and then I had some fantasies about her, not explicitly sexual ones, in which I imagined myself as a man talking with her, and I felt I should talk about these fantasies with her, but I never did.

In the stories of early experiences lesbians narrate that they were aware that their "boyishness" and/or attractions to other women were conflicting with the dominant gender and sexual norms and rules from which they drew their feelings of being different, of feeling other. They attempted to justify and neutralize their feelings of difference or to create fantasies in order to legitimate their attractions. Such an introduction of the stories attempts to locate the origin of lesbian identity. These narratives also point out the discontinuities between sex, gender, and sexuality.

Conflicts of Gender and Sexuality in Heterosexual Relationships

In reference to those women who trace their stories back to their childhood and adolescence, other lesbians consider themselves as unusual types, since they came out as lesbians later as an adult. Nevertheless, they organize their coming-out stories

similarly to their above mentioned companions. They begin their life-stories by saying that "I started my life in hetero relations" as Márta Kis puts it, and articulate their conflicts of gender and sexuality, which they interpret as the origin of their lesbianism, retrospectively. Thus these women locate their conflicts within their previous heterosexual relationships instead of experiences in childhood or adolescence.

Márta Kis, who is in her late forties, comments on emotional dissatisfactions and fixed gender identities:

If my marriage hadn't broken down, I wouldn't have even thought about it, it is a different question that I have a very independent personality, and men like dependent women, they don't like women as partners who are so strong-minded as me, men like to subordinate women, and if I had such a feeling I escaped, if I had found a man who was sensitive and didn't subordinate me, I wouldn't have any objections, but I didn't.

Eszter Kende, who is in her mid-twenties, talks about conflicts in communication and power relations between women and men:

I had a very conscious decision that there is something wrong in communication between women and men, and I could do whatever, I could even stand on my head, I wouldn't be able to transgress this communication blockage, we communicate very differently, and there was a gray fog around where I couldn't enter, so it was nonsense to say anything, since there was no

equal dialogue between us. The other thing which helped me arrive here is that it is very difficult to make an equal relationship between a woman and a man, since men have much more social power.

Éva Timár, who is in her early twenties, traces her problems back to sexuality between women and men: "I didn't see anything exceptional in it, I must have looked for something, I expected more of this thing which was called sexuality."

These interview participants also monitor their lives in search for earlier clues for their lesbianism. Márta Kis, for example, says:

Later, I realized that if it is so simple and natural to me, and if it does not cause me any problem, it must have some roots, which I could definitely find. If I lived in a society where I could choose whether I want to live with a woman or a man, then probably I would have never wanted to live with a man. But when I was young, this was given to me.

Eszter Kende also reflects on similar retrospective thoughts:

Since I always heard from others that they were in love with this teacher or that girlfriend when they were children, but I did not have such feelings. Later I realized I kissed a girl in the sixth grade, but I thought it was only a sexual foreplay which was not attached to the particular girl, although I am not sure about it any more.

Women who came out as lesbians in their adulthood constantly allude to lesbians who trace back their stories to their childhood and adulthood. Not only do they define themselves in opposition to these women, but they also reread their lives in search for early sources and evidences for their lesbianism as if it could be the only viable beginning of lesbian coming-out stories. These implicit and explicit allusions to lesbians who draw on their early experiences reveals a normative aspect of lesbian coming-out stories. Following the standard form and themes of the coming-out stories suggest that women conceptualize their lesbian identities as original, they thus obscure the shift from straight to lesbian identity.

Coming Out to Oneself

In their gender and sexual nonconformity, the narrators attempt to label their difference. It is a difficult and anxiety-filled struggle to unfold their difference, since their heterosexual and homophobic surroundings influence them in thinking that *buzik* are despised and dangerous. Ágnes Nagy, for instance, narrates how she first encountered the category *buzi* and its dominant connotations:

I had a friend, (...) and she left to travel around Western Europe, and when she came back, she said that she lived in a motel, where her roommate was a *buzi* woman, and she was scared that something would happen, I don't know why, and then it turned out about the woman that she wasn't *buzi*, but politically lesbian, so she wasn't attracted to women, but she struggled for them, so she was a feminist, but this word didn't exist here at that time, we

didn't know about it, but then it was clear to me that one should be scared of these women, so if someone was *buzi* we must be afraid that we have to sleep with them in the same room and so on (...) it was a proof for me that people are afraid, it conveyed a message for me, not that one should be afraid, I wouldn't be afraid of such a woman, but the message was that I shouldn't talk about it, because people would get scared of me.

Others become stigmatized as *buzi* in their adolescence which hindered their subjective identification as lesbian for some time. Betti Szűcs, for example, wrote a love letter to her girlfriend when she realized that she was in love with her. Her friend spread the gossip within her class which led to her stigmatization and exclusion from the group:

Once in the high school a very pretty Italian girl came to stay at my place, and every girl in my class was fond of her, and somehow they — I could only find it out later — they transmitted the information to her that I was *buzi*, and the girl became scared and thought that I must be a satyr or something and I would rape her. And she could make everybody believe, and I don't know whether she really believed it, but the news was spread that I harassed this girl. Afterwards the girl asked me if she could move elsewhere, and she did.

Betti Szűcs could not identify with the shaming and exclusionary term, but dissociated herself and entered into heterosexual relationships for a while. Anna

Szabó once traveled to France with her choir, and her best friend was there with whom she was in love, and

everybody on the bus was laughing at us that we were like a bad married couple, and there was somebody who even said that we were like *buzi*, and I was offended very much at that time, I cannot be offended any more, but I ~~they hurt me only kidding~~ now that my friend was not hurt, she just smiled, since

The heteronormative regime requires that women should also be heterosexual which can impede their self-identification. Kriszta Gyárfás, for example, tells the story of her first affair in the following way:

Finally, it happened during a night in a very strange way, because I became sick and went out to vomit, so it had this psychological effect, I don't know how to say it, I cannot say that my upbringing was very bigoted or something, so probably I could not believe that such thing could happen to me, I knew that it wasn't the right or the normal way.

A long time often passes between feeling different and coming to terms with themselves. However, their attraction and affection to other women become more and more significant and pervasive, they thus conduct an internal dialogue with themselves through which they first articulate their lesbian identity. Anna Szabó, for

example, comes to terms with her lesbianism at the end of her intensive friendship in her adolescence:

So putting into words meant for me not to admit the word itself, but to admit the space it takes in my life, to see, to reveal how important it is, so gradually I revealed that about 50% of my life is about being lesbian, so it wasn't a formulation that my god I was lesbian, but the space it took became gradually greater and greater. As I said about my teacher it was only an occasion, this is how I felt then, it was for once, but then with my high school friend it was different, though it seemed that it was a part of my personality, it wasn't for once any more, but it was within me and didn't depend on the object of my love any more that I love women, and when this friendship was about to break up, it became a conscious meaning that I was lesbian.

Berta Tóth recalls that she was in love with a woman in her teens, "when I talked with myself about it, I cried it out from myself." Zsófia Molnár talks about similar difficulties while she was coming out to herself:

When it became crystallized in myself that I am really a lesbian, I was just strolling on the streets and it took me weeks to make peace within myself, since people have terrible biases against it.

The articulation of their lesbian identity does not convey relief, since silence, secrecy, loneliness, and fear still envelop them. The unfolding and labeling of their

difference does not facilitate self-acceptance, and nearly all of the women I interviewed attempted to enter into relationships with men. Ágnes Nagy, for instance, narrates how she wanted to prove that she was "normal" through an affair with a man:

If it wasn't compulsory for me to try it out with men, I am sure I wouldn't have tried it out, I don't understand this trying out with men, I didn't care, but I had to do it, it was compulsory for me, I felt, if it didn't happen with a man, I wasn't normal, so I wanted to prove that I was normal, and I had an affair with a guy, it was more of a must than an experiment.

Zsófia Molnár also talks about how she wanted to prove that she was not lesbian: "I had sex with three guys to prove that I am not lesbian, but I could not."

Lesbians who shifted from heterosexual relationships to lesbian ones as adults also went through a similarly long process before disclosing their lesbian identity to themselves. Because of the conflicts in their heterosexual relationships, they feel that they can have a look at "what is on the other side" as Eszter Kende puts it, but they do not immediately define and label themselves as lesbians. Eszter Kende, for instance, had been living together with another woman for months,

I was exploring what this thing is about, so I wasn't really sure whether I am a lesbian or not, though I enjoyed it a lot, and it was very difficult to me to reconcile it with my old life, but one morning I woke up and realized that it was over and I am lesbian.

Éva Timár was alone for a year after her first relationship with a woman was over when she came out to herself as lesbian.

Through coming out to themselves the women interviewed name their difference and claim a lesbian identity, name their selves which have been a source of unintelligible conflict between their interior experience and the exterior cultural norms and expectations. The conflict between the interior and the exterior entails conflict within the self, but coming to terms with themselves "facilitates the unification of the inner self," though the inner self still remains in conflict with the outer or presented self (Weston 1991). Lesbians most often need exterior examples to contribute to their self-acceptance, to the process of identification, and/or to the practices of coming out to others.

Looking for Cultural and Personal Examples

Loneliness hampers the process of coming out which often recurs in the interviews. "I believed that I was alone like this," says Kriszta Gyárfás or "There are a billion people on the Earth and I am the only one," notes Ágnes Nagy. Most of the lesbians interviewed look for cultural and personal examples to ease and comfort their loneliness, and/or enable and foster their coming out to self and others. Cultural examples can be various: films, books, and articles about famous lesbian and/or gay persons; direct or indirect contact with lesbian persons; trips to other countries where gayness and lesbianism are regarded as more acceptable; and feminism.

Berta Tóth evokes the time when she first saw the Hungarian film entitled *Looking at Each Other* at the age of eighteen:

it was a great outburst for me, and I saw it eight times, and I watched it like sneaking in and all my guilty conscience from childhood came up to me that they would think that I was *buzi*, because I was in the cinema to see this movie, and the audience either laughed or was surprised, but sometimes the audience was all right, and I looked around to see if there were any other *buzi* there, who came to see the film for the same reason, so it was a turning point in my life, I was thinking about it for months, and I don't know, I was very upset and happy at the same time that I found some support.

Anna Szabó remembers her mother telling her stories about her gay friends:

A Canaan that I could never reach, so there were people like that, although I did not know any. Where were they? These were very nice stories, and it was good to know that these people exist, all right, I knew that they do exist, but now I knew that there was someone who knew gays personally, and it was my mother.

In many narratives, trips to the West is a returning motif, an occasion when they see other gays and lesbians who prove to them that "it exists and it is normal and accepted, nobody is astonished" as Ágnes Nagy puts it. She first dares to express

her attraction to another woman in such a context in Paris, where she became "more confident" about her identity. Betti Szűcs spent half a year in the United States,

the university, where it was much more open, it was not so hidden and closeted, and the whole attitude towards homosexuality was not so negative. (...) In the dormitory, for example, there was a girl about whom everyone knew that she was bisexual, I didn't like her, but it doesn't matter, and my best friend there was also bisexual, but I could not see these things in Hungary.

Betti Szűcs found models for "out" lesbian and bisexual women which helped her come to terms with her own identity and disclose her lesbianism to herself and to others.

Direct contacts with gays and lesbians provide personal and everyday examples of lesbianism or gayness, and enable self-identification. These meetings are especially important for those lesbian women who came out in their adult age. Thus Éva Timár, for example, met and got involved with a gay community before having any relationship with lesbian women. Eszter Kende comments on her meeting a foreign feminist lesbian:

she was the one, the person, who brought the whole thing close to me, I mean being gay, and she was very natural and positive about it, she disclosed her gayness in an attractive and alluring way (...) ever since then we have been

good friends, she shaped my personality and gayness, so lesbianism could come close to me.

Sára Kecskés invokes her first contact with a gay professor at her university, who contributes to coming out to herself:

The only person I knew and was out as a homosexual was a foreign gay professor. By the way I think that he knew that I was lesbian earlier than I did. When he had his lecture series on *Gender Roles In Civil Society*, I went to listen to him, since I was interested in homosexuality as a topic, I saw every film, read every book I found.

Attributing a position to other gay and lesbian persons that they foresee or know that they are lesbian, earlier than they lay claim to a lesbian identity implies that they consider that lesbianism has an essence which can be seen to someone who can read the signs.

For some of the interview participants feminism plays a crucial role in constructing their lesbian identities. Eszter Kende, for example, not only meets gays and lesbians before coming out as a lesbian, but also meets feminism. She describes the significance of feminism: "for being able to do this I needed feminism, to overcome this wall, and to see that it is possible to do this, to see what is on the other side." When Eszter Kende and Márta Kis talk about the conflicts in gender norms and rules in their heterosexual relationships, they translate their experiences

into feminist terminology, such as the "power relationship" and the "fixed gender identities" between women and men.

Cultural and personal examples contribute to and facilitate coming out to oneself and to others as lesbians. These examples not only provide support for lesbians in their loneliness and secrecy, but also convey the message that lesbianism is acceptable and disclosable to others. The significance of cultural and personal examples often recur throughout their lives and define some of their interests.

The role and importance of cultural examples are generationally specific, since they appeared in the mass media after the breakdown of state-socialism in Hungary. However, Mária Nemes was in her thirties when she found the first article about gays in a British magazine:

Once I read about a homosexual demonstration in the Times, I was very astonished, I think it was in 1981. In the coverage of the Times there was somebody in a T-shirt with a sign: I love Gay America. Thus I thought there is a world where people go out to the streets, here nobody knows anything about gays and they don't know that there are many of us.

Although it is important to find some cultural examples, the question remains whether these examples can break the loneliness, provide support in the midst of difficulties and burdens, and convey patterns for constructing and claiming a lesbian identity when they arrive late in one's life.

Coming Out to Others

In coming out, lesbians break the silence and bring talk of their sexual identity into their social relationships. Thus they "create a sense of wholeness by establishing congruence between interior experience and external presentation, moving the inner to the outer, bringing the hidden to light, and transforming a private into a social reality" (Weston 1991:50). In their representation and assertion of the self, lesbians expose their identity as a social fact constituting a space for discussing and negotiating their lesbian identity. Coming out to others is thus an inscription of themselves into "the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible" (Fuss 1991: 4).

However, disclosure of the self does not purvey "some absolute position of 'in' or 'out' of the closet," since most of the lesbians interviewed have come out to some, but remained closeted to others (Weston 1991: 48). Coming out to others is situationally defamed, and it entails power and control to decide and determine whether to come out or keep silent in a particular relationship, at a particular situation. In coming out, lesbians also control the mode and content of disclosure through which they intend to challenge the dominant discourses of homosexuality (phase, sickness) and negotiate the interpretations of their lesbian identity (Plummer 1995, Weston 1991).

The stories of coming out to others are most often included directly in the narrations. Anna Szabó, for example, introduces her coming out to others after recalling how she came to terms with her lesbian identity: "what is also essential to the topic is how my surrounding accepts it." At other times coming out to others are only discussed with the help of my questions within the interviews. The response

reveals their initial silence about the topic, as Berta Tóth puts it: "well, this is an interesting thing, of course one always tends to forget what is problematic."

Although secrecy and silence first create personal autonomy and boundaries that defend their inner, intimate self and foster their identity construction, they also have a damaging effect, since they isolate and divide, elicit lies and suspicion in their social relationships. Anna Szabó regards secrecy positively after coming to terms with herself:

in the first period it was important that I know and nobody else does, it was a secret which could have been told and it only depended on me whether I want to tell somebody or not,

but later she feels uncomfortable about it, and decides to come out to others: "I told them, because it disturbed me that they do not know such a great portion of my life." Eszter Kende also develops a similar argument about her problems with silence: "there is something in my life that I cannot share." Both Anna Szabó and Eszter Kende articulate that they disclosed their lesbian identity in order to overcome the split in their lives, the split in their selves between their hidden selves and self-presentations.

The narrations of coming out to straight family and friends are thus structured in terms of a conceptual opposition: disclosure which entails honesty and hiding which entails lying and suspicion (Weston 1991). Most of the women interviewed discuss coming out or hiding in front of their parents, siblings and/or children first, even though they usually disclosed their lesbian identity to some of their friends

earlier. Coming out to family involves an anxiety-filled struggle, since not only disclosure of the self is at stake, but it also "yields insights into relationships" (Weston 1991: 51). Éva Timár, for example, comments on how anxiously she collected all her power and strength before coming out to her mother:

I visited my mother with a decision that I knew I had half a day with her to spend, which was very rare in our lives, and I could spend with her two days, and I thought that on the first day I would prepare and collect my strength, and if I found the appropriate moment, or if I could create it, then I would tell her somehow, but I knew it would be difficult, and on the first day I couldn't, because I thought if I could on the first day, then I would do it as soon as possible, so afterwards we could have time to talk about it if possible, but I couldn't do it on the first day, and I went to bed in the evening sweating, I suffered a great deal, because I only had the next day and no other occasion, and it was as if I could not see any other occasion in my life, I felt really bad, and the next day I woke up and decided even more strongly that I should talk now or never.

Eventually Éva Timár revealed to her mother that she loves women, but her mother did not respond: "afterwards there was sheer silence, no reaction at all, which was more intimidating, since I could not say anything to her silence." Éva Timár felt disappointed, since "I expected something else from a mother."

Coming out can take two different forms: it can be either a direct statement or an extracted statement. Direct statement entails a face-to-face, up-front disclosure of

lesbian identity. Zsófia Molnár, for example, comes out directly to her mother: "I was sitting in the kitchen, and I said, mom, I am *buzi*." Márta Kis first prepares the ground for revealing her lesbian identity to her children, and she tells them her experiences about meeting gay people. One of her daughters is more interested in the topic, so she discloses her lesbian identity to her:

I went to see my daughter one morning, and I told her I wanted to say something to her about my life. She knew it, but she was glad that I told her.

In contrast, extracted statements are acknowledgments of lesbian identity after some questions put forth by parents. Anna Szabó, for example, claims a lesbian identity in front of her mother: "I didn't tell her first, but she persistently asked me questions, and we had a discussion about it eventually." Eszter Kende also unveils her identity indirectly to her mother:

my mother is such a person who found it out in a minute, so it was like a puzzle, she solved it in about 50 seconds, she asked if that woman, because I had been with her at home before, it was very important for me to go home with her, and I also talked about her, so my mother asked if that woman had any relationships, and I said she had, it happened during Christmas shopping in a tramstop at Kálvin square, and she said if it was with another woman, I said yes, she asked if it was with me, and I told her it was with me. Then she started to laugh that she and my father had already figured it out, and they had

already thought about it, but it was this confused kind of laughing, so it wasn't so, we hadn't talked about it for months.

Coming out not only means disclosure of the self, but it also requires attention and response, and introduces a dialogue about women's their lesbian identity with their straight families. The discussion is a long, never-ending process with shifts and changes. Narrators talk about their family going through different stages: silence, negative reactions, and acceptance. Eszter Kende, for example, meets silence when she provokes her mother to speak about her lesbianism:

Whenever I talked about my girlfriend it was simply as if I dropped something and it never fell down to the ground, so they didn't, they never responded, as if I didn't even say it, I had the feeling that I didn't exist, I ceased to exist, because this part of me didn't exist for them, and it was after they were so accepting to my previous boyfriend (...) it is fantastic, I think it should be tested metaphysically, if they really think that it is not there.

She emphasizes that "it will be a hard work, consciousness-raising, until she and her partner become members with all rights" in the family. Eszter Kende can only discuss her lesbianism with her half-Jewish uncle who occupies a structurally similar, subordinated position:

He was the only one who could ask me intelligent questions, and he told me that he had a lot of conflicts, because of his minority status, and we had a good discussion, he was the only one who was interested.

Discussion about lesbianism between parents and daughters does not necessarily bring acceptance. Nóra Lukács, for example, often talks about her lesbian relationships with her mother, who "always tries to find solutions, and help me in every given situation, but she is still full of hope that I will grow out of it." Parents need time to accept their daughters, thus their reactions shift in the long run. Zsófia Molnár, for example, talks about how her mother's first reaction was embedded in the dominant medical discourse on homosexuality. However, Zsófia's mother has gradually accepted her daughter, and lesbianism has become an essential part of their conversations:

She said that she suspected that I was lesbian, and she also said that she would take me to a doctor, since there must be some kind of hormone or something. I told her I didn't think so, but if it made her feel better we could go, but she accepts it now, she doesn't have any problem with it, but she doesn't understand it, she doesn't think that it is some illness or something any more, and she said she isn't happy about it only because it would be difficult for me to find a partner, and I told her not to worry about it, so there isn't any problem with her.

Anna Szabó also mentions the shift in her mother's reactions: "it is part of her everyday life as well, I mean that I am lesbian, she couldn't stay wherever she was when I first told her." Lanna Szekeres's daughter also needed time to accept her mother's lesbianism. When she first came out to her she became very upset that her friends would not accept her, and she would be excluded because of her mother. As she started to talk about it with her friends and encountered acceptance, "she began to joke about it, and I knew that she has already accepted it."

Women who conceal their lesbian identity in front of their family provide justifications for their decision by evaluating their relationships to their parents or their parents' personality. Kriszta Gyárfás, for example, complains about guilty conscience, because she hides her lesbianism, but she cannot take the risk to loose her only family:

I have been doing it in secret for many years, but I do not feel well about it, I hide it because of my parents. If they were those people to whom one could tell, I would feel much better, since I always have a guilty conscience now (...) I don't know how our relationship would change, they might suspect that I love women, they might calm down, but they might also alienate from me completely, and I don't want that, this is my only family.

Kriszta Gyárfás also wants to protect her mother "who is sick and it would be terrible for her if she found it out," and she has moved to Budapest from her little home town, so her parents would not discover her lesbianism. Betti Szűcs justifies

hiding her lesbian identity in front of her mother in terms of her mother's relationship to family:

My mother devoted all her life to create an ideal family, and probably it is not very nice of me, but I don't want to destroy this ideal, because if I suddenly broke it, I think nothing would remain for her. So I don't know what will happen to my mother then, because this has been her life. And I am sure she could not accept it.

Betti Szűcs not only bases her argument on evaluating her mother's relationship to her family, but also on her reactions to her friends' homosexuality:

My mother only whispers the word homosexual, and she does not say any other word like gay or lesbian. But she knows that my cousin is gay and a friend of mine is also gay, but they are not her children. Probably her attitude becomes more tolerant this way, but I don't think that she could accept her own child, this is something else.

Klára Kovács talks about hiding her identity in terms of lying to her parents:

I feel I have to lie, because it seems that lying is not so harmful than truth. I always have guilty conscience, though, but I always think about what would be more damaging on their lives or on our relationship, and I always decide that it is less damaging, and I talk nonsense, I lie, I don't share things with

them, if they ask about something, I start to talk about something else (...)

Last time my mom began to tell me that I should find a man, and I became very nervous as usual, because I did not want to tell her something rude, I did not want to start to quarrel with her, but I would have really told her that I am not interested in any men, I am sorry to upset you. It is really difficult to come out safe from these situations. But so far I have done all right.

Although Márta Kis has come out to one of her children, she did not come out to her parents: "family relations are about something else, about love, and they never ask me, they accept me as I am." She also evaluates her relationship to her old parents, and says:

If I think about it, and put things on the scale why it is better for me if I tell them and why it is not, and why it is better for them and why it isn't, then I think I won't be able to change anything in this family.

However, hiding her identity in front of her other daughter causes her trouble, and defines their relationship as superficial, since "we don't talk about things which are real, important or problematic for me, though there are things in which our relationship is not superficial."

The interview participants also say that their parents are suspicious of their being lesbian. However, when parents voice their indirect questions they do not lay claim to their lesbian identity. Mária Nemes, for instance, talks about her father in these terms:

Two boys appeared together on TV, and my father was watching the TV, and I was in the other room, and he opened the door and called me to watch the program since there were two gays on TV. I thought I would faint right there that my father knew everything. So we watched the interview together. (...) Later I was in hospital for two weeks, I had pneumonia, and when I got out of the hospital, my father asked me what the word lesbian meant. I told him we shouldn't discuss it now, and he didn't forget and he asked again. I told him that a lesbian is a woman who loves women, but we didn't have any conversation afterwards. So, this is lesbian. That is it.

Kriszta Gyárfás also thinks that her father suspects that she loves women:

Once we had a talk, and I drank quite a bit, and on the way back I had to call my girlfriend, and then he came to me and asked me what was going on, and I knew he wanted to ask about it, but I pretended if I did not get it. I would tell him, but then he would pass it on to my mother.

Márta Kis assumes that her sisters are aware of her lesbianism, but she does not claim her identity to them, because she encountered their rejection of her girlfriend:

My younger sister told me that she was like a *buzi*, and my older sister told me something very similar, but in a much more hateful way, and it was very intimidating to me, and we could not talk about it ever since.

Zsófia Molnár, for example, has not come out to her sister, but she says that "she knows, and her sister is very weird, because she doesn't pronounce such words as *buzi*, last time she was talking about something and a *buzi* was on TV, and then she said he was ill, so it is very ridiculous."

Most of the women lay claim to their lesbian identity in front of their straight friends, old and new. Some of them talk about some friends who supported them in their self-acceptance. Kriszta Gyárfás, for example, talks about an older friend:

I had an older friend with two children to whom I came out first, and she was the one who helped me go forward and told me not to cause any problem for myself, because I would only ruin myself. I was on drugs at that time.

Others narrate about asymmetrical friendships, since they do not equally share their feelings and thoughts with each other. Through coming out lesbians attempt to transform their asymmetrical relationship into symmetrical. Berta Tóth, for example, mentions how she came out to her best friend:

I felt I could not go on any longer and there was a woman whom I loved, and I told my best friend about it when I was 18, I was over my great love-relationship, and she did not know, but I knew about all her affairs, so I told her that I fell in love with this woman.

However, her friend could not accept Berta Tóth's lesbian identity first, and disappeared for a year, but they have become good friends again later. Anna Szabó also mentions the awkward situation of silence in her friendship while talking about coming out to her best friend:

For a long time we have been close friends, when she asked me whether I have a boyfriend. It was really comical, since we were very close to each other. She said she did not believe that I had, but she wanted to ask, and then I replied that I was interested in something else, and I think she knew right away what I meant, because I could see that she froze, it was completely new for her, and then she asked if it was music or literature, but I told her that I was interested in girls.

Anna Szabó's friend just as Berta Tóth's friend needed some time to adjust and accept the fact that their friends were lesbians. Eszter Kende also talks about the time her friends needed to accept her lesbianism, but she asserts that "they completely accept it now, and treat me naturally, they ask me about my girlfriend, and they are also interested in the political changes concerning gays and lesbians in Hungary."

The lesbians interviewed are more willing to put their friendship to test than their relationships to their family. Nóra Lukács claims that "I like to share my lesbian identity with my friends, since I will find out right away what the relationship is about." Coming out to friends thus also yield insights into their friendships, and they sometimes risk losing their friends. Márta Kis, for example,

met a woman in a feminist organization with whom she developed a good friendship, and she disclosed her identity to her:

I thought I had to tell her in the beginning of our relationship, since if we want to establish a deep friendship, she has to know this about me. I wrote her a letter that she has to know it about me, I wrote it in a very matter-of-fact way. And she completely misunderstood me and closed herself up in front of me, and she didn't even talk to me afterwards, but I heard from others that she thought I wanted something from her.

Sára Kecskés says that she came out to all of her old straight friends, but only those remained her friends "to whom I can tell if I have some personal problems, problems with my girlfriend, for example, but I broke up with those of her friends for whom lesbianism was a topic, or with whom I always had to change subjects."

Women who do not come out to their friends justify their hiding by evaluating their relationships or their friends' personalities. Klára Kovács, for example, introduces a friend of hers in this framework:

She is married and has two children, a girl from the countryside, and her way of thinking is very conservative, and as time goes by, she becomes more and more conservative. I cannot really relate to her, but whatever has been connecting us for twenty years still connects us.

Coming out to others usually becomes especially significant in a period in their lives. "There was a period, when I came out to a lot of people. It was around the age of 19 and 20," says Ági. Anna Szabó also mentions that she had a coming out period, and she chooses the publication of her lesbian article as an opportunity for coming out to her classmates and larger family: "There were some people to whom I only showed the article, so I didn't have to talk, since our relationships weren't verbal enough, but I told others." However, coming out is a repetitive practice, since as soon as lesbians encounter some new people, the problem of secrecy and silence reemerge. Márta Kis narrates that "if I develop a new close relationship with someone, I come out." Eszter Kende mentions that "coming-out becomes a game after a while, how I tell it to others and how they react to it."

Conclusion

"It takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian," writes Teresa de Lauretis in her book about lesbian sexuality (1994). The life-stories analyzed above convey that lesbian identities are constructed through attractions, affections, and coming-outs, thus lesbian identities are produced and reproduced interactively through a very conflict-ridden, negotiated process. Lesbian identities constructed in and through the coming-out narratives interrogates the dominant image of lesbianism. Coming-out stories challenge the assumption that lesbianism is only personal and reveal the social condition of the construction of lesbian identities. In coming out, lesbians bring speech about sexuality into their social relationships which contest the conventional boundaries of public and private.

The coming-out stories are linear and retrospective, since lesbians reconstruct the conditions and stories which made their lesbian identities possible. Lesbian coming-out stories begin with feeling different and the burden of silence, and lead to the construction, articulation, and disclosure of lesbian identities to themselves and others. Kenneth Plummer traces the linear and causal structure of coming out stories to the modern tradition of transformation stories (1995). Plummer finds three common elements in these narrations: *suffering* which gives tension to the action, *crisis or turning point* where something happens, and *transformation* which brings reconciliation. Feeling different can be interpreted as suffering, coming out to oneself can be interpreted as crisis, and coming out to others can signify transformation.

Plummer looks for the cultural and historical conditions that reveal why lesbians and gay men choose this mode of narration to describe their own experiences. He finds two explanations. Coming-out stories fit into the well-known stories of suffering, crisis, and transformation, therefore, they overlap with those stories that everybody knows. Lesbian coming-out stories provide similar form to different experience, make lesbian identity-construction intelligible. Coming-out narratives appear in a certain historical period, in a certain cultural context. As I argued in my Introduction grass roots gay and feminist organizations and movements provide space for the emergence and proliferation of lesbian coming-out stories in Hungary.

Lesbians narrate about the processes and practices through which they articulate, strengthen, and disclose their identity. The organization and interpretation of their experiences are essentialist, since they interpret that their

lesbian identity not only alters but defines their lives, their lesbianism has an origin and reflect back on their total personhood. Lesbian life-stories thus become different from other life-stories, and they also define something which is common to all lesbians. The modern transformation-stories provide an appropriate form to the essentialist life-stories, that is, to the lesbian coming-out stories (Martin 1993). Lesbians thus construct their own essentialist stories. The adherence of lesbian identities and coming-out stories to essentialism "is a measure of the degree to which a particular political group has been culturally oppressed (...), then the stronger lesbian endorsement of identity and identity politics may well indicate that lesbians inhabit a more precarious and less secure subject position than gay men" (Fuss 1989: 98).

CHAPTER THREE

COMPANY OF OTHERS "LIKE" THEMSELVES:

NARRATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF LESBIAN COMMUNITIES IN HUNGARY

Lesbian communities are predicated upon shared gender and sexual identity, upon longing to belong to people alike. Communities are thus not defined spatially as a bounded entities, but understood symbolically as a sense of shared gender and sexuality and as a sense of common experience of oppression and exclusion by patriarchal and heterosexist society. Furthermore, lesbian communities play an important role in the formation and enactment of lesbian identities (Schuyf 1992).

Meeting other lesbians and joining lesbian communities not only enable women to construct and reconstruct their identity, but also make them recognize differences among themselves, differences which interrogate their unified and totalizing conception of lesbian identity.²⁷ Hence, a lesbian community is not a singular and homogeneous notion rested exclusively on sameness and commonality, but multiple and fragmented, made up of loosely defined smaller social circles. Lesbian communities are "overlapping networks" of circles of friends and lovers, and of members of feminist and gay civil organizations (Esterberg 1997).

Lesbian communities cannot be discussed in isolation, without stressing their nexus with feminist and gay groups which offer public space for lesbians to assemble and to engender their own initiatives. Lesbian friendship networks, and gay and feminist civil organizations foster one another. Some friends and lovers of

²⁷ See Chapter Two.

lesbian activists join the organizations, while the organizations help to establish and strengthen social ties among lesbians. Yet, gay and feminist groups are also sites of conflicts, where lesbian identity is often rendered invisible and muted.

The call for lesbian community-building put forth by feminist lesbians blurs the sharp boundaries between different lesbian friendship networks, but it also redraws the boundaries of difference elsewhere. *Labrisz* evenings, the lesbian-only meetings are thus not only sites of support, but also sites of conflicts and differences between politically conscious lesbian women and non-political lesbian women. Lesbian circles of friends and lovers redefined as *lesbian families* provide another illustration of lesbian communities based on the interplay between shared sexual and gender identity, and ethnic and class differences.

In the following chapter I analyze the narrative representation of multiple lesbian communities to which lesbians belong in Budapest, Hungary. First, I discuss coming out in terms of joining gay and lesbian communities which help women affirm their lesbian identities. Then, I examine feminist and gay organizations that mobilize lesbians to socialize and to engage in community-building and political activities, but feminist and gay groups also evoke conflicts of invisibility for lesbians. In the third part of the chapter, I investigate the community formed and contested at *Labrisz* evenings, the lesbian-only meetings, where the boundaries among many isolated friendship networks and activist lesbians are both cross-cut and reconstituted. Last, I examine those lesbian circles of friends and lovers that think of themselves as family.

Coming Out to a Lesbian or Gay Community

In coming-out narratives, the interview participants tell a story of their first visit to a gay or lesbian community or bar, their first disclosure of self to other lesbian and gay people. Since they feel alone and isolated, they are looking for a company of like others, looking for a sense of belonging, and a positive confirmation of their identity. Coming out can thus be conceptualized as "a transition between no community into community" (Weston 1991).

Coming-out accounts furthermore provide a sense of common cultural ground, a bond for lesbian-identified women by virtue of their common experience of heterosexist and patriarchal oppression (Butler 1990). Occupying a common cultural ground enables, shapes, and empowers lesbian communities, forges social ties among lesbian women. In *Labrisz*, the lesbian-only monthly meetings, coming-out stories are recurring topics for discussion which foster a sense of shared identity and experience, a sense of belonging among the women participants.

Most of the women interviewed report that they feel lonely and isolated, even if they have a partner who urges them to meet other lesbian women. After her first relationship broke up, Klára Kovács narrates that "I stayed there all alone, and began to search for some kind of a lesbian circle, relationship, or community." Nóra Lukács also met her first lesbian circle of friends, when her lover split with her. Her previous straight friends were "sensible to completely different things," thus she had to look for lesbian women to share her experiences of her first lesbian relationship and her breaking up:

I was very upset, and I needed people who could understand my problem, and then I found my ex-girlfriend's friend, and I knew that she liked me, and it was not completely groundless that I turned to her, since the basis of every friendship is some kind of an attraction, either emotional or erotic. Through her, first I met two women, then some others, and it became a very strong group.

Eszter Kende defines her first partnership as an isolated partnership, since they did not know any other lesbian women, although "I had a strong demand to probe our relationship not only among the four walls, but in a community." Through her American partner she met some American lesbian women in Budapest with whom they formed "a little community," but then they all left. When Eszter Kende broke up with her girlfriend, she fully realized how much she needed the company of other lesbians:

It was very difficult that there wasn't any community, and there was no one who would support me, which I would have needed very much to overcome my lost relationship, I felt alone, (...) then I had the feeling that I have to work on my own community, so others would not have this experience and find these kinds of things easier.

However, to come out into a lesbian or gay community is often an anxiety-filled act. Zsófia Molnár recounts her difficulties about joining gay communities in terms of coming out:

For the decision to go to the community you also need to come out, to say that you are lesbian, which you may know about yourself, but it is different to claim it to others, and of course it is not the same than to come out on TV and say that you are lesbian, it doesn't happen on that level, but you have to accept it and come out somehow, and I think, I don't know, but to see how many lesbians don't come to the meetings, they never accept their identity, they never come out, I think it must be very difficult.

Anna Szabó explains how she was pondering about whether to come out in a gay community:

It was a great struggle with myself whether I should visit the *Gay Circle of University Students* or not, since it is against my nature to meet people who are strangers to me, and I had to present myself there as a lesbian. Finally, I made up my mind and went there.

When Betti Szűcs's cousin came out to her as a gay man, she also told him that she might be lesbian. Her cousin recalled to her how he made his initial steps to join a gay community, and he also invited her to the first meeting of the *Gay Circle of University Students*. Betti Szűcs accounts that "I had to present myself there as a lesbian, and not a person with uncertain sexual identity."

Sára Kecskés met a feminist lesbian professor at the University who invited her to a lesbian night in a gay bar, but first she got deeply terrified:

I have not seen such a thing before, and I was not sure what I wanted to be. I had a year when I was sure that I was not attracted to men, but I thought I was not lesbian. I thought I had to decide how to present myself, but I didn't know whether I wanted to be a lesbian. When I got to *Capella*,²⁸ I was very nervous, and realized that I have to drink alcohol in order to be more easy-going. My tension dissolved, and I sat down to talk to some women. One of the women started to approach me, and some things happened between us very suddenly, which was very unusual for me, but practically all my sexual anxiety disappeared at that night. I had the feeling that before I had questioned what I wanted to do from all kinds of perspectives, but at that time my sexual desires won primacy, and from then on I was sure that I was lesbian.

Meeting on the basis of shared identity is described as a new sense of belonging. Although Eszter Kende was first very skeptical about Hungarian gays and lesbians:

I thought I didn't really belong to the American lesbian community, but somehow I located myself there, I couldn't identify myself with Hungarian gays, I thought that they are miserable people, who don't claim their own gayness and have many problems, but I wanted to be positive and out.

Nonetheless, when she joined the *Háttér (Background) Support Group for Gays and Lesbians*, she had the strong feeling that "I have found my home, (...) I felt that I

²⁸ *Capella* is one of the gay bars in Budapest, Hungary.

belong to somewhere." Márta Kis emphasizes a similar sense of belonging after she and her first girlfriend gave up their isolated life and came out to a Jewish gay group. Although they are not Jewish, the Jewish gay community was the first community they could meet and it was also inclusive to non-Jewish gay members:

We didn't know any other gays, with my girlfriend I led this double-life, (...) but a new gay community, *Sidra* was then established, and I first met a gay community there, where they talked about their feelings about being gay, and about how their surrounding accepts it. I found it very interesting how others felt, and I could also speak about my own perceptions. It was a very good feeling that there is a community to which I belong.

Joining a lesbian or gay community is not unambiguous, since there are "so many kinds of gays" as Mária Nemes puts it. Therefore, a lesbian community is not a single and unified community, but multiple and fragmented communities, friendship networks and organizations. The existence of different lesbian communities extends and undermines the assumption that lesbian communities are solely based on shared lesbian identity. Zsófia Molnár talks about meeting two lesbian circles:

First it was very good when someone took me to the *Angel Bar*²⁹ or wherever, and it was a very good feeling to see that there are other *buzi* as well, not only me, and there I could meet people, but I also had the feeling that I was very different from them, or I don't know. First I thought that if someone is *buzi*

²⁹ *Angel Bar* is one of the gay bars in Budapest, Hungary.

like me, then we must be similar in so many things, but it wasn't true, so it is just like anywhere else. And then I went to *NaNE*, and met different *buzik* there, who were more like me, and it was so good to feel that I could relate to them.

The presumption that once they meet other lesbian women they encounter women who are similar to them is a dominant theme in the coming-out narratives. Borbála Virág and Judit Csillag, a lesbian couple for six years, assumed that they would meet other couples like themselves within lesbian circles, since they thought that lesbian women tend to remain in long-term relationships, but they had to realize that there are very few couples among lesbian women in lesbian communities. Mária Nemes, an economist, first encountered lesbian women in *Club 93*, a lesbian and gay friendly pizzeria, where she was astonished to see that "they were very different, there wasn't anybody among them who had a university degree, but they had different jobs, they were policewomen and businesswomen."

The Framework of Feminist and Gay Civil Organizations

Lesbian communities cannot be understood without alluding to their entanglement with gay and feminist civil organizations. Grass roots feminist and gay civil organizations offer space for lesbian women to enter, to do volunteer work, and to develop social ties with other gay and lesbian people. Within the stable frameworks of gay and feminist organizations, lesbians dismantle their biases against "movements" and "organizations," biases which remained with them from state-

socialism. They learn the political strategies and effects of grass-roots movements, and participate in the making of civil society. Furthermore, feminist and gay organizations also enable and empower lesbians to recognize their subordinated position, to develop political subjectivities, to make lesbian initiatives, and to create a civil organization of their own.

Most of the lesbian women who have joined some feminist organizations perceive feminism as fundamental to the inception and development of their political thinking, however, they only remain within the framework of these organizations temporarily. Márta Kis encounters feminist ideas in the *Feminist Network*, although she claims that she has been a feminist all along:

I have realized that I think and live in a feminist way, although I was not aware of it, I did not articulate it for myself. It comes from my sense of justice, I live according to it, and that is feminism. In the *Feminist Network*, I have also learnt about different kinds of feminisms, where they are coming from, and how it has emerged in Hungary and abroad. I have also met feminist groups from other countries, I have learnt about their way of thinking, and about what they are working on. I was very interested in all these things. It gave me strength to work for women and gays.

Eszter Kende learns about feminism at a course at the University which was a revelatory experience for her and which helped her join a feminist group:

It was a women's studies course, and it had a great impact on me. After the first or second class I realized something, it was like a sudden revelation, and all my earlier experiences and thoughts found their place. I immediately joined the *Feminist Network*, and participated in the abortion campaign. It transformed my thinking a great deal, shaped it in a political way.

When the abortion campaign was over, Márta Kis with other feminist lesbians established *NaNE*, a women's organization fighting against violence against women. Ágnes Nagy, Zsófia Molnár, and Sára Kecskés joined *NaNE* later, and there they have encountered feminist thoughts and other lesbian women.

However, lesbianism has been silenced and invisible in these women's organizations for a long time, and coming out as a lesbian has been troublesome. Sára Kecskés, for example recalls:

I had a problem once because of my lesbianism. A new training was going on and I said something, not that I was lesbian, but something related, and my partner in the group exercise found it out right away. She asked me whether I hate men. I hate to face such questions, because I cannot respond to them, and I knew that she did not really want to ask about men, but about my lesbianism. She did not come any more. Afterwards others told me not to discuss my lesbian identity openly, because I scare away other women who would be good volunteers.

Márta Kis also remembers that her disclosure of lesbian identity was problematic in the *Feminist Network*. She met a woman there with whom she developed a good friendship, and she came out to her:

I thought I had to tell her in the beginning of our relationship, since if we want to establish a deep friendship, she has to know this about me. I wrote her a letter that she has to know that I am lesbian, I wrote it in a very matter-of-fact way. And she completely misunderstood me and closed herself up in front of me, and she didn't even talk to me afterwards, but I heard from others that she thought I wanted something from her.

Márta Kis, who remained in *NaNE* for the longest period of time among the Hungarian lesbian women, narrates how the consideration of the disclosure of lesbian identity has shifted there throughout the years:

At first nobody knew who was lesbian, it was a secret and a taboo, even the people who were within the inner circle did not know who were gay. But it has gradually become more open. In the last couple of years we had this exercise, for example, how one confronts difference. Somebody reads a text and we stand in a circle, and those who are different in something have to step into the circle, those whose father was an alcoholic or who was stigmatized as a whore and so on. And in the list there is a question which asks women who have been in love with other women to come into the middle. Some of us stepped forward, and others either accepted it or left.

Some lesbian women leave feminist organizations due to the burden of silencing and closeting their lesbian identities or the negative reactions to their coming out, while others define their leaving in terms of gender. Eszter Kende criticizes feminist organizations that "women cannot hold a group together," whereas Márta Kis points out that "a women-only organization does not work so effectively as a mixed one." Yet, *NaNE* is the organization which has offered its public space for lesbians to come together during the *Labrisz* evenings for a year and a half.

All these feminist lesbian women join *Háttér (Background) Support Group for Gays and Lesbians*, and become activists for gay rights and work voluntarily for the gay telephone helpline. Politically conscious lesbian women who participate in *Háttér* are both feminists and non-feminists, and form thirty percent of the membership by now. Márta Kis emphasizes that she prefers working among gays, since work is "more structured and consistent there than among women," and she also draws attention to the common cultural ground between gay men and lesbian women:

I can make myself understood among gay people much better than anywhere else, I feel myself well among gay people, because I don't have to explain to them anything, of course, there are differences among our personalities, so there are some people who are closer to me, others are not so much, but I don't have any problems with them. I have my best time among gays, and I like to work with them.

Klára Kovács also discusses her positive experience of meeting gay men in opposition to meeting straight men earlier in her life:

There are some boys, but I never have the feeling which I have always had in my life some kind of expectations, some expected femininity towards men, I have to be attractive or fascinating in which I am not interested. Everybody has been very kind and positive, and I always go home delightfully, because the environment in *Háttér* is so relaxing, and everybody I have met there is so nice.

However, conflicts between gay men and lesbian women sometimes appear. Ágnes Nagy introduces these conflicts in the following way:

I don't feel a sense of community with gay boys, because I have some negative experiences, they treat women as only women, as a subordinated kind just like heterosexual men.

Sára Kecskés also reveals conflicts between gays and lesbians in *Háttér* in similar terms:

There were some conflicts, for example, male paranoia has sometimes appeared which exists in every man, even a in gay man. If we were talking about lesbian women doing something separately from them, then many of the

gays started to shout at us that this was lesbian separatism, and we had a common organization and why we could not work together. And we told them that there are some things in which we lesbians are only interested, but they wouldn't understand.

In both feminist and gay organizations lesbian women sometimes encounter invisibility, invisibility of their difference of being lesbians among women or being women among gay men. Within the gay, feminist, and lesbian triangle lesbian women also point out the nexus, the common cultural ground for their cooperation and shared struggle against patriarchy and/or compulsory heterosexuality. As more and more women appear in *Háttér*, lesbians can renegotiate their space within the organization, and they have just been successful having that *Gay Pride Day* renamed as *Gay and Lesbian Pride Day* this year, which offers more visibility to lesbian women within the gay organization and in public life.

Lesbian Friendship Circles and Labrisz Evenings

Clearly, feminist and gay civil groups are not all-embracing organizations. Some of the lesbian women interviewed do not join any of these civil organizations, but they create friendship networks, frequent gay bars and lesbian parties. However, non-political lesbian women tend to justify their decision to me, probably because I contacted them through their activist friends. Kriszta Gyárfás, for example, a member of a lesbian circle of friends and lovers, shares her views about gay organizations with me:

I met some members of *Háttér*, and I think they are snobs, I don't think that speaking, fighting, and propagating our gayness are necessary, I guess it is everybody's private business, so I didn't join them, though I could have. I don't think I can do something for our acceptance, we will never be safe, so I have to do it in secret. We are not considered to be normal people, but I think some famous people should come out and claim their sexual identities. We didn't feel that we had to propagate our identity, this is our private life.

Berta Tóth formulates her opinion even sharper, and interrogates the legitimacy of lesbian communities and gay movements:

I could never understand how people can meet only because they are all *buzi*. Just because she is like me in one thing, because she also fucks other women, she might be very stupid, she might have very different interests, she might like other paintings and watch different TV programs, so she might be very different. I don't like any social movements either, and I don't agree with how the *buzi* movement understands coming out and asserts that it is good for us that we are *buzi* and we value ourselves more than others.

In other words, she rejects communities and movements based on a shared lesbian identity, and her circle of friends consists of underground artists, "who don't find lesbianism to be an exciting topic." She can thus legitimate and confirm her lesbian identity in a non-lesbian community, deploy and render other aspects of her identity

salient — such as being an amateur artist — in order to construct her friendship networks and her sense of self.

In the narratives, many women represented lesbian friendship circles as having rigid boundaries, sometimes applying the metaphors of "cells" or "tin cans" to them. However, they also tell stories about crossing these boundaries. Éva Timár, for instance, tried to trace these circles in order to join them, and accounts for many different kinds of friendship circles:

There are all kinds of lesbian circles, circles based on different sports, circles of dancers and actors, circles of bus drivers, and circles of older women among whom there are many alcoholics, since they have gone through a lot of things. It is interesting how much they insist on their own boundaries, they don't want to mix with other lesbians, since it is safer and familiar to them.

Lanna Szekeres also depicts bounded lesbian circles that she encountered in her search for partner:

Lesbians tend to form little circles, little cells, and these cells sometimes connect to each other and people can pass through the boundaries. But these cells usually have a very strong cohesion, which is very repulsive, though if somebody is very determined, for example, if she is looking for a new partner, she can pass through the membranes. There are differences among these circles, since their inner culture is different, they develop a similar

language and style, there are some who tend to be very masculine, for example.

Labrisz evenings offer space to lesbian circles of friends and lovers and to lonely lesbian persons to socialize and mingle with one another. *Labrisz* meetings are inclusive spaces for lesbians to gather beyond the confines of gay bars and nightclubs, feminist and gay organizations. Politically conscious lesbian women from *Háttér* organize these meetings in order to build a lesbian community and to invite new members into politically oriented lesbian activities. Sára Kecskés, the initiator and organizer of the meetings, describes the inception of *Labrisz* in the following way:

Four years ago I had this dream in *Háttér* that within ten years we can have a separate organization for women. But we were only six or eight of us in *Háttér*, and did not know other lesbian women at all, so we thought it did not have a future at that point. But two years ago more and more women came out in different places, in gay bars as well as in the *Club for Each Other*. Three of us from *Háttér* also made the first issue of *Labrisz* and a lot of lesbian women called *Háttér*, and we received fifteen or twenty letters, so we started to think about where these women were, and decided to bring these women together. I thought that if these women came together and invited their friends, then in a short period there would be a lot of women and among them some would be willing to take part in political initiatives and introduce defined political projects, like actions, petitions, and hotline for lesbians once a week. I don't

think that we have reached this point, but remained wherever we were two years ago when we first met, lesbians come to meet each other, though not only fifteen women, but forty or fifty women come.

Labrisz evenings invite more and more lesbian women of different age-groups, from their late teens to middle-aged women, from Budapest and from the countryside to participate. The meetings blur the boundaries among the already established circles of friends and lovers, and between political lesbians and non-political lesbians.

Many women take part in the monthly meetings in order to "see new lesbian faces who have just come out to the lesbian community" as Márta Kis puts it, or to meet their friends and acquaintances on a regular basis. Some of the interview participants also develop new relationships, friendships, and love-relationships.

Kinga Durell, for example, who was a lonely lesbaan woman, has become very "easy-going" when she came out in the meetings, and made friends with a couple of lesbian women with whom she also meets beyond the *Labrisz* meetings, goes hiking and does trips during the weekends and in the summer. Other lesbians recall that they have fallen in love with women whom they have met during these meetings.

Klára Kovács narrates that "I saw Nóra among her friends in one of the *Labrisz* evenings, and we started to talk there, our relationship has begun there." Márta Kis also says that "my relationship with Lanna has started there, if there was no *Labrisz*, we would have never met." Some lesbian women who first came out in *Labrisz* meetings have become engaged in lesbian political activities: the process of having the first Hungarian lesbian organization registered, the establishment of a

lesbian archive, the publication of the first lesbian magazine, and the organization of lesbian festivals.

Labrisz evenings not only offer the possibility for creating social ties which cross-cut pre-drawn boundaries among lesbian circles, but are also occasions for reconstituting boundaries and emphasizing differences among lesbian women. The interviewees define differences among lesbians in dichotomies. Ágnes Nagy names "feminist lesbians and butch-femme women," Mária Nemes defines "politically conscious lesbians and women with leather boots and red wine." And Klára Kovács sees "activists and women who frequent bars and pubs." All these distinctions emphasize differences between political and non-political lesbian women, which both cross-cut and obscure other differences that exist among lesbian women.³⁰ The binaries also reveal that activist or politically conscious lesbian women can be feminists, but not necessarily, and non-political lesbian women can be bar-lesbians, but not exclusively. However, Klára Kovács, who does not identify with either of these categories and groups, though she is an active member of *Háttér*, provides a more nuanced portrayal:

Labrisz evenings are full of women with whom I can talk. It is a very important possibility, and the possibility is the most important. Everybody goes there who is interested in similar women or wants to spend her time somehow. These differences make it difficult to organize programs, because the ways we think are very different. But it is only a technical problem, since we can also form many smaller groups for women who like hiking, for

women who like drawing, and everybody can take part in whatever she is interested.

Márta Kis claims that "the age-scale is very wide, but most of the women are young, but some older women also appear, and I think that after a while it will fall apart into smaller groups according to different interests and personalities, just like in other countries."

Lesbian women have different aims at and interests in participating in *Labrisz*. Non-political women are mostly concerned with meeting other lesbians, to develop and foster social ties among themselves, while politically conscious lesbian women strive for establishing a lesbian community which can serve as a rallying point for lesbian politics. The two groups thus define the public space offered by the feminist civil organization differently. Lesbian activists define and use the space as political and public space, whereas non-political lesbian women redefine and use the space as protected and private space. The space thus constructed becomes an in-between space, shifting and clashing between political and private spaces. The exclusion by straight society underlines its existence for both political and non-political lesbian women.³¹

Appropriation of the Family

³⁰ Susan Krieger also argues that the lesbian community she studied is divided between political and non-political women, although political women are described as exclusively feminists and non-political women are depicted as exclusively bar-lesbians in her book (1983).

³¹ Esther Newton defines the gay resort town, Cherry Grove on Fire Island, as "a ghetto into which they were pushed by the hatred and intolerance of straight society" (1993: 9). However, she regards the place as an example of private sphere.

Judith Butler in her analysis of Jennie Livingston's ethnographic film, *Paris is Burning*, reads the Afro-American and Latino drag balls as both an enunciation of kinship system that maintains the balls and an occasion for building kinship relations (1993). She points out that "it is in the elaboration of kinship forged through the resignification of the very terms which effect our exclusion and abjection that such a resignification creates the discursive and social space for community, that we see an appropriation of the terms of domination that turns them toward a more enabling future" (1993: 137). The lesbian, gay, and drag appropriation and reproduction of the family is thus not a mere imitation of heterosexual family, but a cultural reworking and renegotiation of the meaning and practice of the family.

Last spring I had lunch with two Hungarian lesbian women living in Germany in a cafe advertised as gay-friendly cafe in international brochures about Budapest. One of the women asked the other why she plans to stay in Budapest for the year. She immediately responded that her family lives here, and named Márta Kis and myself as part of her family. Márta Kis is her former love and friend, and she and I have a four year long friendship. The narrative representation of the family is a returning motif among some of my interlocutors portraying lesbian circles of friends and lovers.

The interviewees conceptualize their lesbian families in opposition to their families in which they grew up. Klára Kovács, for example, explains:

It is very important that these ties exist, because I cannot really share my lesbianism and everything that comes with it with my parents and heterosexual friends. But we have to talk, because there are so much sadness and

happiness, even greater ones than elsewhere, and we have to talk about them, and I can only talk about them to these people, to my new family.

Lanna Szekeres elaborates on the need to create lesbian and gay families in the following way:

It has an illusion of the family, since most of us couldn't realize it in our own family, and it does not necessarily mean that it was a bad family or family ties were not strong enough, but it wasn't what we imagined to be as family. I think it is a characteristic of gay relationships that they create substitute families for themselves. I am sure it is because they cannot have children and a lot of other minor things. I knew completely well that it was only an illusion, but I really enjoyed it, I felt at home and well.

Both of them imply that some distance or disruption has occurred within their straight families, either due to coming out or remaining silent and closeted, which urge them to construct their own families. The impossibility of adoption and artificial insemination for lesbian women in Hungary are also listed as reasons to create "substitute" families, although Lanna Szekeres, who introduces this assumption, is a lesbian mother and her child is incorporated within her gay family.

In speaking about lesbian family members, most of the interview participants claim that their ex-lovers have become part of the family. Ágnes Nagy, for instance, introduces her former lover as "we have a good friendship now, I consider her as a member of my family." She also regards another ex-girlfriend and her

current partner as family. Berta Tóth also counts her former lover as family, although she has difficulty in making her present partner understand the situation:

I still live together with my ex-girlfriend, we form a classical family, and I told my current girlfriend that this is my family which she also has, mother and father, so it is a different kind of a family for her, and it troubles her, she thinks that I come home to another woman, but I come home to my family, who happens to be a woman.

Klára Kovács narrates how her former lover has become her family:

It was the first lesbian relationship for both of us. We had been friends for a year and a half, and then it turned out to be a love-relationship. Ever since we split we are like sisters, mother and child to each other, and I guess it will go on until either of us dies, it will stay with us. Sometimes if I think about it I say how beautiful it is. It is a family. (...) I guess within normal heterosexual relationships, between two heterosexual persons, it does not exist somehow. Obviously, because girls become friends from the start, and then they remain family.

Friendship underlies love-relationship and family-relationships, and lesbians talk about their friends and family members interchangeably. In Kath Weston's terms: "discussions of gay families pictured kinship as an extension of friendship, rather than viewing the two as competitors or assimilating friendship to biogenetic

relationships regarded as somehow more fundamental" (Weston 1991: 118). Weston regards gay and lesbian families as a continuum of friends and lovers, a continuum between nonerotic and erotic relationships.³² The uninterrupted presence or return of former lovers, and their reinscription in lesbian families shows a strong adherence to lesbian communities, and gives a sense of security, continuity, and protection to them.

Not only former lovers, but friends as potential lovers are considered family members. In the discussion of her family Nóra Lukács, for example, explains that "the basis of every friendship is some kind of attraction, emotional or erotic." Although some members of Lanna Szekeres's family were also her former lovers, she emphasizes another powerful connection, an ethnic tie within her family:

I have always been attracted to the narrative of minority within minority, and within the minority a smaller circle evolves, and to be Jewish is a very powerful tie among us. I have experienced that to be a Jewish lesbian or gay is a very strong connection in our family, although not everyone of us is Jewish.

Klára Kovács narrates that on the basis of shared experience she incorporates a whole group of people into her family, and considers them as her brothers and sisters to her:

³² Kath Weston's discussion of the discourse on family among gay and lesbian people living in the United States reveals that gays and lesbians demand social and legal recognition of their kinship ties (1991). Obviously, it does not happen in Hungary, however, some of the lesbians do lay claim to families of their own.

In the *Háttér* training group I think everybody who took part became very close to one another. During the time of training we met every second week for a year, and traveled to Lake Balaton and to Pécs together. We knew completely well what was happening to the other, how he or she felt, what they did and so on. This emotional tie has remained with us even if we don't talk very often any more. But whenever we meet it is like a tie between siblings that holds us together. It is a very strong emotionally, since we revealed ourselves to each other to such an extent that we cannot wipe it out of our lives.

Borbála Virág and Judit Csillag, a lesbian couple, label and call each other as "mom" and "son," but their family includes another person, too, a lesbian woman whom they met during a trip lasting several days. She has become the "grandmother" within their family. They argue that the everyday experience of the trip offered them a common and mutual understanding on the basis of which they could construct family ties.

Lesbian families thus embrace former, current, and potential lovers, and friends with shared experiences or shared ethnicity. However, lesbians describe their families as having fluid and fuzzy boundaries. Lanna Szekeres, for example, describes: "Our family was like a big sack in which everybody felt really well, some people joined us meanwhile, and it became a very close, very tight relationship among us." Klára Kovács describes her extended family in the following way:

We sometimes say that our family is too big when newer and newer people come and cannot disappear or stay away for a while. Sometimes it is even disturbing that continuously I have to be a mother and a child to so many people, and take care of them, since I take care of my family.

Klára Kovács points out that roles among members within her family shift constantly. The interlocutors portray their families as including different and sometimes shifting family roles: mother and child, grandmother and grandson, brothers and sisters. These family roles cross-cut generational and gender boundaries, women from the same generation can appropriate intergenerational roles or women from different generations can take up intragenerational ones, just as women can appropriate the family roles of son and brother. These families not only incorporate lesbian women, but often include gay men who can assume the position of a brother. Lanna Szekeres's Jewish family or Klára Kovács's extended family are revealing illustrations of having gay family members.

In the quotation above Klára draws attention to the fact that "taking care" renders these relationships a family. Others are more specific in describing the emotional and material assistance which they provide reciprocally to one another. Nóra Lukács narrates:

I could feel a strong sense of solidarity, it was a circle, and we met regularly in Kriszta's apartment. It has been about being together, a steady connection. It is a shelter for me, a family. Everybody asks me how I am, what is going on with my things, and it is mutual. They care for me, it is not something

very deep, but they look at me and smile at me. The basis which keeps us together is participation and compassion, we support each other, we can count on each other. It is both emotional and material support, and there is always somebody who is in trouble, and it has to be solved, and there is always only one person who has money, who buys food and gas, borrows a videotape, gives accommodation for the night, and these are quite enough and have to be repeated every day. Support is very important because we realize that we need each other. We communicate with one another continuously.

Besides providing material and emotional assistance, and signs of enduring solidarity, the lesbian circles of friends and lovers classify themselves as family because of the everyday basis of their contacts. Lanna Szekeres portrays these everyday get-togethers in this way:

There was always somebody at our place, day and night. We lived a family life together, a very extended family life with eating, drinking, partying together, or if anybody had a problem, then we immediately helped her out, supported her.

Ágnes Nagy points out how her former lover can cross the boundaries of their home: "she can come to my place at any time, I can go to hers at any time."

To join an already existing lesbian circle of friends and to become a family member is not unambiguous. Nóra, for example, meets a group of lesbians of a different class background. She comes from an intellectual, middle-class family,

whereas her current family members come from working-class backgrounds, therefore, she had to work for her acceptance, for her membership.

These women have a very different background, and I needed time until I moved from the outside to the inside. They didn't accept me right away, but simply I have done things with them and step by step I have become part of it, part of the family, and it is worth it. First I supported them, then I realized that they laughed at my jokes, and it took me time to rephrase my sentences, so others could understand them.

Some of the interview participants, like Klára Kovács and Nóra Lukács, claim that their family ties last forever, but others have met conflicts within their families, they thus regard these ties as provisional ones. Lanna Szekeres, for instance, describes how her "illusionary" family broke up:

It consisted of many microrelationships between members, with their own language. It was like a milk shake, but by now the shake has run all over the place. These microrelationships used to bring all of us close to each other, they used to weave us together, but now they separate us. Some couples broke up, others used to work together, but cannot any more, still others made some new friendships which could not fit into our family.

The appropriation and reconfiguration of the language and practice of the heteronormative family by some lesbian circles of friends and lovers nurtures the

intertwining of their social ties and enforces their attachments to these relationships. Lesbian families also provide a different set of relationships for women compared to other communities and organizations of lesbian and gay people. Although lesbian families often overlap with broader lesbian networks, family membership is not only based on shared lesbian or gay identity, but also on shared past experiences and ethnicity, and on enduring relationships with former and current lovers. Common backgrounds offer possibilities for deeper understandings and solidarity, everyday contacts and meetings, emotional and material supports - the practice of creating a family. Weston claims that "the concept of families we choose proved attractive in part because it reintroduced agency and a subjective sense of making culture into lesbian and gay social organization" (Weston 1991: 135).

Conclusion

The narrative representations of lesbian communities show that the lesbian women interviewed search for communities of their own kind, communities which are based on shared sexual and gender identity, and on common experiences of patriarchal and heterosexist oppression and exclusion. Most of them claim membership in multiple communities, in friendship circles, in gay organizations, in the newly established lesbian group (the *Labrisz*) and/or in lesbian and gay families. These communities are not only sites for commonality and support, but they are also sites for conflicts and differences. Within the framework of communities lesbian women recognize their differences among themselves. In feminist and gay organizations lesbian women encounter conflicts with feminist women and gay men due to the invisibility

towards their lesbian specificity, while in lesbian-only circles they acknowledge their differences in terms of politics. These differences create conflicts and divisions among lesbian women in *Labrisz* meetings, but differences can become common cultural grounds for other lesbians in a context of creating their own families.

CONCLUSION

POLITICS OF LESBIAN REPRESENTATIONS

Let me conclude by summarizing what I believe I have accomplished in this study. In the Introduction I have argued that the emergence and circulation of dominant representations of lesbians and lesbian self-representations are embedded in a particular historical context. The collapse of state-socialism in Hungary transformed the public sphere and offered the possibility of the introduction of civil society. However, liberal civil society is predicated upon exclusions and marginalizations which the analysis of civil society in gendered and sexualized terms reveals. The dominant discourse that delimits the boundaries of the public sphere relegates women and gays to the private sphere. Yet, subaltern counterpublics such as feminist and gay civil organizations appear on the margins of the liberal public space in order to accord positive recognition of gender and sexual difference, and thus expand the official limits of civil society. Gay and feminist counterpublics incorporate politically conscious lesbian members which sets the ground for lesbian counterpublics.

In Chapter One I show that the sporadic representations of lesbians in the Hungarian media construct lesbianism in an ambivalent way. Although they give rare visibility to lesbian women, they represent lesbians in dominant terms. Journalistic representations perpetuate certain cultural stereotypes about lesbians as well as reinscribe lesbianism into mainstream discourses. The stereotypic cultural representations fix and reduce lesbianism into three pervasive figures: the sexually saturated figure, the pathologized lesbian, and the couple who regard their

lesbianism as a bedroom matter. Two dominant discourses underlie and maintain the demeaning cultural stereotypes, a minoritizing and a normalizing discourse. The minoritizing discourse psychopathologizes and oversexualizes lesbians, whereas the normalizing discourse treats lesbianism as a private matter. Within both discourses lesbian difference is constructed as and restricted to sexuality, and sexuality is constructed as and reduced to its personalized and private understanding.

In Chapter Two I explore how lesbians represent and construct their identities in coming-out narratives. I have shown that coming out is both a process of identification, an extended journey of self-discovery and an endless series of repetitive acts which promote and support the constitution of agency. In coming-out narratives, lesbians present their identity as original, continuous, and totalizing. The adherence to essentialism provides coherence and legitimacy to lesbian identity, and makes coming out to others and political actions possible in a context which refuses to recognize lesbian difference. Although lesbian self-representations reproduce the dominant representations of lesbians by laying claim to essentialist conceptions of identity, they also contest mainstream representations at several points. Lesbian coming-out stories reveal how women search for and assert their identities which interrogate the self-evidence and fixity of straight identities. Furthermore, lesbian coming-out stories challenge the personalizing discourse on lesbianism by pointing out that the construction of lesbian identity is deeply embedded in social conditions and relations.

In Chapter Three I have shown how lesbians represent and construct their communities in narratives. I have argued that lesbian communities affirm lesbian identities as well as differences among lesbians. Lesbian communities rest on shared

identities and common experiences of exclusion, and mobilize political, ethnic, and class differences among lesbians. Communities are multiple and fragmented social arenas, circles of friends and lovers, gay and feminist organizations, and the lesbian-only *Labrisz* group. I have argued that feminist and gay organizations not only enable and support lesbians in forging social ties, but often render lesbian difference invisible. Gay and feminist civil organizations empower lesbians to recognize their subjected position and to promote social agency, and politically conscious lesbians subsequently created a lesbian-only group. However, *Labrisz* meetings not only bring together and blur the boundaries among different lesbian friendship circles, but also reconstitute boundaries between political and non-political lesbian women. I have also investigated how lesbian circles of friends and lovers appropriate and transform the language and practice of heteronormative families. Lesbian families are constituted in the intersection of lesbian, class, and ethnic identities. This inquiry into lesbian communities calls into question the depoliticized representations of lesbians that appears in the dominant media. Moreover, it challenges the totalizing self-identification of coming-out stories by paying attention to the differences and conflicts among lesbians.

Although this study of lesbian representations does not reveal the complexity of lived experience, but does expose the productive possibilities of the politics of representation. By juxtaposing dominant representations of lesbians and lesbian self-representations of identities and communities, I have shown how these representations overlap and at times conflict. Lesbian self-representations expand, contest, and resist the mainstream representations, yet self-representations do not necessarily displace and undermine dominant representations. The politics of

representation calls forth lesbian identity politics, and thus grounds the recognition of lesbian difference in Hungary.

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